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Author's Note + Catch Up

Welcome to the fourth book of Clouded Skies! I would (obviously) recommend reading the first three books first, but I guess you can do you. And I decided that, since three books comprised of a total of eighty chapters is a lot, I'm going to put a simple description of each book just so everybody remembers the general plotline of what was happening. If you don't want to read it you can just kinda skip through it.

EDIT: I'm currently near the end of the fourth book of this series, but I decided to rewrite the story and will no longer update for this storyline, but I will keep the books up to be read

The First Storm:
Ravenpaw becomes a medicine cat apprentice and discovers he can see briefly into the future by touching a cat's nose, while Rowanpaw of BatClan struggles with starving survival. A Twoleg is found dead in the EchoClan forest, and the apprentices get in trouble for going to see it, with surprisingly harsh punishments from their leader. Rowanpaw goes on a journey into the Old Twolegplace, which was ravaged by a fire around the time the Clans were created. He and three warriors are trying to find something to help their Clan, and though there is some prey in the town there is so much soot and danger that it might not be worth it, yet they continue. They end up finding a tom named Rohan, who ends up being revealed as Rowanpaw's father. They meet up with Aspenheart, Rowanpaw's long-lost mother, and he is furious, as he hates her for abandoning him. He also finds out he has three little sisters. Ravenpaw is visited by the first leader of his Clan, Echo, and learns a little about the past. Rowanpaw, his Clanmates, and the Twolegplace cats are attacked by foxes and decide to go back to BatClan together. Ravenpaw considers getting rid of his power, but Echo convinces him to keep it. He returns home to find out Twolegs have invaded. Dawnstar is hesitant about letting in the rogues and trusting

Aspenheart again, but she decides it's worth the risk.

Frost:
The Twolegplace cats are welcomed into BatClan as real members, and at a Gathering, Acornstar reveals more of her unstable personality. Twolegs are encroaching more and more on EchoClan territory, and Blossompaw is injured quite badly. They decide to attack the Twolegs and their dogs, managing to drive them out after Russetdawn is extremely injured. Rowanpaw struggles with dealing with his parents in BatClan and works with Birchsplash to rescue two kits and drop them off at EchoClan. Sadly, the tom dies quickly, but Goldenpool takes in the she-kit despite Acornstar's anger. Rowanpaw experiences a great shock with Emberheart's death and Hopekit's birth, and breaks on the inside. Ravenpaw learns of the existence of MothClan, and goes to find the father of the kit they found, Maple, with the help of Jaypaw. They find Rain, and bring him back to EchoClan, where he is allowed to join. Acornstar is furious, but the Clan is quickly distracted by the approaching battle with SageClan, which they are very divided about. Russetdawn dies from what is believed to be an infected wound, and Foxpounce and their kits are incredibly upset. At her vigil, Ravenpaw finds out she was expecting kits when her ghost briefly visits him. Acornstar forces them to fight SageClan, and the Clan is furious when they lose the battle. Blossompaw is mysteriously healed.

Silent Stars:

It's revealed Blossompaw killed Russetdawn after being influenced by long-dead Brookstar, a traitorous leader that killed many cats. Ravenpaw and Mossrain are shocked by Blossompaw's sudden healing, while Acornstar is angry and perhaps a little scared, and realizes Blossompaw is being trained by Brookstar. She flees but returns later that night to try to kill her. Ravenpaw wakes and stops her, but she runs from camp in a storm and is unable to be followed. Eagleclaw struggles to remain calm and keep control during this confusing time. Rowanpaw is still broken after Emberheart's death and barely recognizes everything around him. After some infighting, EchoClan decides to send a patrol after Acornstar when Ravenpaw has a vision at the Moonstream. Rowanpaw sneaks into EchoClan and overhears that Acornstar is

gone, but on his way home he's confronted by Aspenheart, and after a fight with a fox he kills her. Dawnstar decides to exile him. An EchoClan patrol quickly finds him but decides to leave him be, only for Willowpaw to begin to visit him. At the Gathering, Dawnstar admits the weakness of her Clan, and CrowClan and SageClan both give some territory. Blossompaw furthers her training with Brookstar and Boulderclaw returns early from the patrol with the three kits of Snowfern's missing sister. Dawnstar, knowing BatClan will be weak for quite a while, allows them to stay in EchoClan. Meanwhile, after traveling quite far, the patrol closes in on Acornstar. They almost stray into MothClan territory but Rain manages to help them keep their distance, and with the help of an old loner they find Acornstar. Ravenpaw learns of her horrible past where she killed for Brookstar but convinces her to return to EchoClan to remove her lives. But when they are leaving they are attacked by dogs and Silverstrike is killed. Later in the day Rain, Shadefur, Stonecoat, and Ravenpaw go back to find his body, but Ravenpaw is captured by Twolegs. Meanwhile, Willowpaw continues with helping Rowanpaw out his grief.

Allegiances

EchoClan

Leader:

Acornstar- ginger-brown she-cat with amber-brown eyes

Deputy:

Eagleclaw- light brown she-cat with lighter belly, chest, paws, and muzzle, has pale green eyes

Medicine Cat:

Mossrain- small gray tom with hazel eyes, has a white patch over one ear and

eye, apprentice Ravenpaw

Ravenpaw- lithe black tom with large owl-like yellow eyes with a lean

face and muzzle, mentor Mossrain

Warriors:

Maskdapple- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with a black patch over her eyes and muzzle, has green eyes, apprentices Firepaw and Featherpaw

Oakcloud- handsome brown tabby tom with brown eyes, apprentice Blossompaw

Boulderclaw- large thick-furred gray tom with white lower half, tail tip, chest, throat, and muzzle, has brilliant shining green eyes, apprentices Rock, Lark, and Pine

Grayblaze- large gray tom with yellow eyes, apprentice Flamepaw

Frostfall- thick-furred white she-cat with blue eyes, deaf in one ear

Snowfern- small lithe white she-cat with black face, tail, legs, and ears, has icy blue-green eyes, apprentices Rock, Lark, and Pine

Rain- gray tabby tom with white unders and blue eyes

Foxpounce- ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Stonecoat- large gray tom with green eyes

Shadefur- large gray tom with green eyes

Pebblepeak- gray tabby with white front paws, has yellow eyes, apprentice Willowpaw

Thorntail- brown tabby with brown eyes

Brightflower- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with blue-green eyes

Petaldust- tortoiseshell-and-white tom with green eyes

Apprentices:

Flamepaw- fiery tabby tom with dark amber eyes, mentor Grayblaze

Featherpaw- dark fiery tabby she-cat with bright amber eyes, mentor Maskdapple

Firepaw- dark fiery red-brown tom with yellow eyes, mentor Maskdapple

Blossompaw- thick-furred white she-cat with silver back and top of head, has light green eyes, mentor Oakcloud

Willowpaw- lithe white she-cat with black legs, ears, face, and tail, has large ice-blue eyes, mentor Pebblepeak

Jaypaw- thick-furred white tom with pale gray lower legs, ears, face, and tail, has pale green eyes

Rock- handsome gray tabby tom with one green eye one amber eye

and long fluffy tail, mentors Snowfern and Boulderclaw

Lark- light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes, mentors Snowfern and Boulderclaw

Pine- brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, mentors Snowfern and Boulderclaw

Queens:

Goldenpool- large dark golden tabby she-cat with golden eyes, kits are Dustkit, Heatherkit, Stormkit

Kits:

Dustkit- dusty brown tom with light golden-brown eyes

Heatherkit- brown-golden tabby she-kit with brown eyes

Stormkit- small solid brown tabby she-kit with golden eyes

Maple- light ginger she-cat with yellow eyes, has white front paws

Elders:

Dappletail- dull tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with dull gray-green eyes

BatClan

Leader:

Dawnstar- pretty tan tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes

Deputy:

Clovertail- light brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat:

Sandflight- tan she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Brackenfoot- almost-black brown tom with dark brown eyes

Brownear- brown tom with brown eyes, missing one complete ear

Hawktail- dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes and a white chest and front paws

Hickoryclaw- black tom with yellow eyes

Leafpelt- black she-cat with bushy fur and green eyes, apprentice Carppaw

Juniperfur- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Duskfang – White tom with green eyes, apprentice Frondpaw

Hazelfur – Light brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Birchsplash- white tom with large black blotches and yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Blazepaw- brown tom with brown eyes, mentor Juniperfur

Carppaw- brown tom with green eyes, mentor Leafpelt

Frondpaw- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes, mentor Duskfang

Queens:

Ashbreeze- speckled gray she-cat with white lower half, has blue eyes, mother of Bluekit and Breamkit, mate Brackenfoot

Rainsong- silver tabby she-cat with white paws, chest, belly, and muzzle, has blue eyes, mother of Flintkit, adopted mother of Hopekit, mate Hickoryclaw

Kits:

Bluekit- blue-gray she-kit with white lower half and blue eyes

Breamkit- light brown tomkit with brown eyes

Fernkit- small gray she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Meadowkit- gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Primkit- solid brown she-cat with bright amber eyes

Flintkit- gray tomkit with yellow eyes

Hopekit- light ginger tabby she-kit with yellow eyes

SageClan

Leader:

Dewstar- black she-cat with brown eyes

Deputy:

Gorsedust- gray tabby tom with gray eyes

Medicine Cat:

Poppysong- tan-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Cindershade- blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

Brookfern- thick-furred brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Briarcloud- thick-furred light brown she-cat with lighter front paws and yellow eyes

Haretail- stubby-legged brown she-cat with stubby tail and lighter paws and muzzle, has brown eyes

Cloudleap- white she-cat with amber eyes

Amberbreeze- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes, apprentice Sparrowpaw

Sorrelfoot- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Flutteringfire- mostly-white tortoiseshell with green eyes

Pouncefoot- dark ginger tom with dark amber eyes

Swiftrunner- white tom with large black patches and yellow eyes

Squirrelleap- red-brown she-cat with green eyes

Pikefrost – ginger tabby tom with blue eyes

Bumbleflight - black tom with one white paw and hazel eyes

Ivypelt - cream she-cat with a white muzzle and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sparrowpaw – white tom with yellow eyes, mentor Amberbreeze

Lightningpaw - thick-furred golden tabby tom with green eyes

Lilypaw - light gray she-cat with darker grey patches and blue eyes

Queens:

Shadowmist - black she-cat with pale yellow eyes, mother of Barkkit and Icekit, mate Robinstar

Hailsong – pale gray tabby she-cat with green eyes, mother of Owlkit, Honeykit, and Elmkit, mate Pouncefoot

Kits:

Barkkit - brown tom with yellow eyes

Icekit - tan she-kit with white unders and amber eyes

Owlkit- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Honeykit- ginger tabby she-kit with amber eyes

Elmkit- gray tom with green eyes

Elders:

Weaselclaw- short-legged gray tom with clouding green eyes

CrowClan

Leader:

Whitestar- white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy:

Roseclaw- russet she-cat with amber eyes, apprentice Sunpaw

Medicine Cat:

Hawkstream- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Heatherpool- ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Larkfur- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Alderfern- brown tom with brown eyes

Rushfur- light brown tom with light brown eyes

Reedtail- long-tailed brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Pinefeather – Dark brown tom with darker brown stripes and yellow eyes

Thrushflight – Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes.

Nightspark – Black tom with a white muzzle, chest, and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sunpaw- golden-brown tabby tom with golden eyes, mentor Roseclaw

Leopardpaw- pretty tan she-cat with darker blotches, has yellow eyes

Queens:

Oakkit- ginger tom with amber eyes

Daisykit- black she-cat with white chest and amber eyes

Fawnriver- light brown she-cat with long thick tail and white lower legs, muzzle, inside ears, tail tip, belly, and muzzle, hazel eyes, kits are Mistkit, Otterkit, Twigkit, mate is Larkfur

Kits:

Oakkit- ginger tom with amber eyes

Daisykit- black she-cat with white chest and amber eyes

Mistkit- gray she-kit with white paws, has yellow eyes

Otterkit- light brown tabby she-kit with hazel eyes

Twigkit- light brown she-kit with green eyes

Elders:

Splashtail- gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Sedgeflower- tawny she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Outside the Clans

Rowanpaw-solid brown tom with bright amber eyes and a long, thin tail, originally a BatClan apprentice

Hail- thick-furred gray tom with hazel eyes

Jade- thick-furred dark tortoiseshell with pale green eyes

Newt- pale ginger tabby tom with deep amber eyes

Slate- solid silver-gray she-cat with green eyes

Felix- small thick-furred brown tabby with brown eyes

Sawyer- smoky-gray tomcat with white paws and muzzle, has green eyes

Prologue

Echo stalked through a dark forest, the long wet grass cold and uncomfortable on her paws. She kept close to the ground, flashing her bright green eyes around the dark trees. They were tall and threatening, baring down on her, making her feel as small as a mouse.

Then a familiar pelt brushed against her's, warm and soft. She looked over at the tom next to her. His brown tabby pelt was darkened and transparent in the forest, but his hazel eyes glowed with a bright warmth as they had in life countless seasons ago.

"Stay close, Echo," he warned softly, his nose brushing against her cheek, ruffling her whiskers. It was cold, but the touch made her fill with warmth.

"Always," she promised, taking in his scent. It was mixed with the thick, dark scent of the forest, a confusing smell that threatened to overpower everything around her, never changing and never betraying itself. She felt lost, as if she would never find her way out. But she kept her heart and mind set. 'Believe and you'll achieve,' her father used to say.

Another pelt slipped close to Echo, the same shade of silver as the dead leader's, but with thinner striping. "No sign of any cat," she reported. "Everything's silent--like always."

"No sign of Brookstar?" Echo asked.

The she-cat shook her head.

Echo sighed. "Thank you, Moonglow. Tell the others to keep searching, but stay in sight. We can't lose anybody." Echo turned from her daughter as they went on, letting Moonglow slip back behind the two leading cats, heading for the shapes briefly flickering through the darkness. Echo knew she had made the right choice with the cats she had brought with her--warriors she trusted.

The brown tabby brushed briefly against her side. "Are you sure this is a

good idea?" he asked softly.

"We need to figure out what she was doing," Echo answered. "It has been many moons since Brookstar fought her way out of here, we need to find out what her plan is. I promise, Rootstar, if anything seems dangerous, we'll leave."

Worry pierced his hushed mew. "You've said that before. We've been traveling here for, well, I don't know how long. Days, probably. This forest confuses the mind." He cast his glance up to the thick canopy of leaves trapping them from seeing the stars. Echo and Rootstar had tried to climb up the trees, but the bark was too thick to get a grip, and no branches were close enough to the ground to jump too.

Echo brushed her muzzle against his, calmed instantly by her mate's scent. "We can't return to StarClan with nothing. We're warriors, remember? We must fight our way through his darkness. Just focus on the light, my dear."

"There's never light when Brookstar is involved," came a cold voice behind them. Echo looked back, spotting their son, Starlingclaw, slipping through the darkness to get closer to them. His fur was darker than his mother's but still a bright, glowing silver that cut through the blackness around the group.

"Even she was a kit once," Echo reminded her son. His meow was sharp but his heart was unmatched in loyalty; he would follow her anywhere without question. He was a good tom, a good warrior. "Her heart has been blackened, but there's still a heart there."

"We're not here to save her, Echo," Rootstar reminded his mate. "We're here to see why she has left the Black Forest."

"To train Blossompaw, that's why," Starlingclaw hissed, his tail lashing briefly. "We should've been more careful--Echo, you saw the signs! We should've put an end to it before it began."

"It's not our way," Echo reminded her son calmly, letting her tail flick out and brush against his shoulder. "The Clans must fight their own battles. If we intervene every time an enemy comes, the Clans would become weak. They must stay strong for the enemies we can't stop."

"Like MothClan?" Rootstar murmured softly.

A brief flash of sadness touched Echo's eyes, and she turned away from her mate. "Yes. Like MothClan."

She quickened her steps to draw ahead, scenting the air. Thick sap, nothing else. "How are we supposed to find her when we can't scent anything?" Starlingclaw asked with a slightly scathing tone.

"I have a feeling that if we travel long enough, she'll find us," Echo murmured, though her mew was quiet.

"Quite right you are."

The voice came from right in front of them, but Echo didn't notice any cat until they had spoken. Before them was a she-cat with long gray fur, and despite the fact that it was slightly ragged, she was stunningly beautiful, with dark blue eyes looking like a greenleaf night sky.

The StarClan cats quickly grouped together, with Echo and Rootstar at the front with their two kits, Starlingclaw and Moonglow, right behind them. "You left the Black Forest," Echo meowed firmly. "How?"

Amusement filled the she-cat's eyes. "Oh, was I not supposed to? I assumed since StarClan is allowed to visit anyone they want, I would be allowed to as well."

"You 'assumed' wrong," Echo growled, seeing the play in the she-cat's eyes. "You are banished here, Brookstar, and you are not allowed to leave, you know that. So don't play games you won't win."

A sudden look touched Brookstar's gaze. "Well, well, well. All this time, I thought if you caught me I was done for. But you threatening me like this... It means you can't *stop me."*

Echo's fur began to bristle. "Watch yourself, Brookstar. You have caused enough suffering for my Clan. Stop this chaos, let the past rest where it's supposed to. Let EchoClan fight to see a better future."

"My way is a better future!" Brookstar snapped, her eyes glowing with anger. "Blossompaw will learn to punish the weak and award the strong. One day she will rule over a better future, a brighter future."

"You've tried that in the past, remember?" Rootstar taunted, his claws sliding out to touch the soft soil under paw. "And you failed each time. Blossompaw has too many cats who love her for you to make her sink to the darkness."

"We'll see about that," Brookstar purred, a twisted sound that was almost like a growl. "Before, I assumed you would stop me if I went to the Clans. But you being here has shown me I was wrong--you can't stop me."

"We can still protect our Clan," Echo growled. "Even if you smother them in darkness, we can show them the light beneath. You can hook your claws as deep as you want, corrupt as many cats as you want, there will still be plenty of loyal warriors to stop you. You will never *take over my Clan!"*

A gleam briefly flashed in Brookstar's gaze. "I see the fear in your eyes, Echo," she taunted softly, her voice becoming like that of a quiet river. "There's a future you saw that you don't want to happen." She gave a brief laugh. "I don't care how long it takes, what you fear will come to pass." Her form began to shiver and disappear. "I am one with this forest, I can travel where I please with a single thought. You are but a visitor, and have no such power. You will search for a way out for an eternity and will never find anything but your own thoughts. Welcome, Echo, to the Black Forest. May your stay be as kind as mine was."

And in a brief stir of wind, Brookstar was gone.

It feels like forever since I got to upload to my Clouded Skies series, and I'm so glad it's back but I am going through a few things in life that makes it hard to write too often, though I will be trying my best. But despite that, I hope you enjoyed the rather short prologue to the fourth book of this series, and that you enjoy the future of this story!

Question #1: What meaning do you think this prologue holds?

Questions #2: What do you think will happen for our main characters? (Rowanpaw and Ravenpaw mainly, but you can comment about other cats if you want)

Also, if you want to ask a few random questions about anything to do with the series I will answer to the best of my ability without giving too many spoilers!

Chapter One

Blazepaw was sharpening his claws on the log that made his den when Leafpelt hurried into camp. He knew something was wrong instantly, seeing her bristling fur and flattened ears. For a brief moment, fear rushed through him that something had happened to Carppaw, whose's late mother, Bloomcloud, had raised him, but then the older tom pulled himself into camp and headed down after his mentor, looking much more subdued.

Blazepaw knew the depression in the tom's eyes was the fresh grief for the loss of his mother and felt a similar pang in his heart. Bloomcloud had been more like a mother than any cat he had known, and her death hit harder than Aspenheart's ever would. His brother had been banished after her death for just over a quarter moon now, but the pain of losing him as well was a fresh injury that would never heal.

Only a few warriors were in camp. Juniperfur, Blazepaw's mentor, was resting after their unsuccessful hunt in the new territory SageClan had given them, and she raised her head to watch Leafpelt. "Is everything alright?" she called, her voice slightly hoarse. She had been coughing all morning, but Sandflight had no herbs to give after spending the entire night trying to keep Duskfang from falling too deep into the whitecough that had gripped him the last few days.

"Is Dawnstar in camp?" Leafpelt asked Juniperfur, ignoring her question.

"In her den, resting--she's been hunting since before sunrise," the tortoiseshell responded, fighting back the cough that tried to spill from her throat.

"Dawnstar!" Leafpelt called instantly, looking to the den at the back of the camp. Dawnstar appeared from the shadows barely a moment

later, her dirty tan fur messy from sleep. "We have... a problem." Leafpelt's tail flicked in uncertainty as she gazed at her leader.

Hickoryclaw rose from the entrance of the nursery and padded over, ears perked.

"What's wrong?" Anxiety glowed in Dawnstar's eyes.

"It's..." Leafpelt hesitated for a moment, then managed to say, "Snowfern, she's shown up at the border with three kits, barely aged to be apprentices. They're... Well, they..."

"Spit it out, Leafpelt," Dawnstar ordered, looking worried and confused.

"They... One of them looks exactly like... Rockfire..."

For a moment, Dawnstar was frozen. Her eyes flooded with memories like a rushing river, slowly getting wider and wider as her ears flattened. "Are you... Are you sure?" she whispered, suddenly looking very small.

Leafpelt gave a quick nod. "Yes, I'm sure! Every stripe is just how I remember it, and his sister... For a moment I thought I was seeing Robinstrike again." The black she-cat dropped her head slightly. "They're waiting at the border for you and Sandflight..."

In an instant, Dawnstar was going for the entrance of the camp. "Sandflight!" she called for the medicine cat, and the she-cat arrived instantly, looking worried.

"What's wrong?" she called, looking around the camp, obviously expecting to see a dying Clanmate.

"Come! I'll explain on the way." Leafpelt and Carppaw hurried after Dawnstar, and Sandflight was just behind them. Blazepaw stood in the clearing, dumbfounded. Finally, he padded over to Juniperfur, who was being joined already by Hickoryclaw.

"May I ask who Rockfire and Robinstrike are?" Hickoryclaw questioned as he settled next to the pretty tortoiseshell.

Blazepaw was grateful for the question, since he had just been about to ask the same thing. The name Rockfire was faintly familiar to his ears, he couldn't remember the story.

"Many moons ago, Dawnstar sent a patrol out of the territory." The moment the words were said, Blazepaw remembered the story from Lakeshine. "It was led by her mate, Stoneshadow, and her son, Rockfire. Another member of the patrol was Robinstrike, Rockfire's mate and the daughter of the last leader, Hawkstar. They never returned, and we never knew why. Dawnstar didn't send any cat after them because we couldn't afford to lose any more warriors."

"And now it seems the kits of Dawnstar's son has come back to the Clans," Hickoryclaw finished, looking quite thoughtful. "Interesting..."

"Quite," Juniperfur agreed hoarsely, running her tongue over her jaws. Then the cats sat in silence to wait.

By the time Dawnstar returned, a patrol of Hazelfur, Brownear, and Frondpaw had already come back to camp and were informed of what was happening. They all looked over as Dawnstar pulled herself into the clearing, and many cats clambered to their paws.

"Is it true?" Juniperfur asked anxiously, trying to stand but falling back down with a slight cough. Brownear took a small step away from her.

Dawnstar paused for a moment on the rocks. Sandflight, Leafpelt and Carppaw slipped past and joined the small crowd, staying quiet because it was obviously Dawnstar's announcement. "The kits brought to the border by Snowfern," Dawnstar began in a strong but sad tone, "are undoubtedly Rockfire and Ronbinstrike's."

Murmurs rushed through the Clan, cats speaking softly and quietly to each other. Dawnstar stood silently, awaiting their silence with grief in her eyes. Eventually, they quieted, but uncertainty wavered through the air like the cold of leaf-bare did.

"They told me the truth I avoided for many moons," she continued, "that my son and mate are... dead. Snowfern offered them a choice

of which Clan to join, but I decided to deny entry to BatClan." her mew broke as she spoke, her tail flat against the rocks.

Shocked meows came from a few cats, while Brownear gave a satisfied nod. "But they're your kin!" Hazelfur called.

Dawnstar gave a sad nod. "And I would give anything to protect them," she answered honestly. "BatClan is still weak, and with whitecough gripping our warriors, I... I cannot risk the kits of my son, the kin of my best friend..."

"So you would give our enemies future warriors to use against us?" Brackenfoot growled, lashing his tail.

"We are not fighting with EchoClan," Dawnstar answered immediately. "The Clans know of our weakness, of our struggle. I have faith in StarClan that they will leave us in peace to grow strong."

"And we could've used new warriors," Leafpelt spoke up softly, her eyes on her paws, but then she forced her gaze up to her leader. "Robinstrike was the cat I was closer to than anyone. She was brave and strong and survived everything thrown at her--I know her kits will do the same. They could've become the best warriors BatClan had seen in a while, but you gave them up so you wouldn't have to watch them struggle like you did for your own kits. You cared for their safety more than all of ours, and we will suffer even worse for it."

Sandflight stared at the she-cat for many moments, then lowered her gaze. Dawnstar, too, was silent. She looked at her warrior for a long time, her eyes a storm of emotion. Then, finally, she meowed, "perhaps you're right, Leafpelt. Perhaps I was selfish in hoping for a better future for my kin. In the moment I only saw them suffering from starvation and sickness without even thinking that you all are doing the same. I promise I will make it up to you, but what's done is done. They will grow into fine EchoClan cats, and perhaps one day that will reveal itself to be for the better."

Without another word, Dawnstar leaped down into camp, passed by her Clanmates, and went to her den. Sandflight started to follow,

but when Juniperfur let out a stream of harsh coughs, the tan medicine cat hurried over. Blazepaw suddenly realized how much she looked like Dawnstar--he always seemed to forget that the aging medicine cat was Dawnstar's daughter, Rockfire's littermate.

"Come on, Juniperfur, let's get you to the medicine cat's den," Sandflight murmured. The tortoiseshell slowly got to her paws and headed after the she-cat.

Blazepaw looked at the camp entrance as Clovertail appeared. She was followed by Hawktail and Birchsplash, with the latter holding a vole in his jaws. Leafpelt hurried to the cats to explain what had recently happened, while Blazepaw crouched against the camp's stone ground. He watched Juniperfur head away and flicked his tail, not knowing what he was supposed to do now.

After Leafpelt finished explaining what had went on, Clovertail stepped forward and meowed, "we should send out another hunt, anyone able to go out?"

"I can," Hazelfur meowed.

"Me too," Leafpelt added, while Hickoryclaw offered his services as well.

Clovertail nodded. "Good. Hazelfur, you lead. Hunt in CrowCla--" she cut herself off and corrected herself, "Hunt in the forest on CrowClan's border. And of course, don't cross the river."

"Of course," Hazelfur meowed with a nod. She led the patrol toward, and Blazepaw hurried after them.

"Can I come?" he asked.

Hazelfur hesitated, a look crossing over her gaze, and he knew what it meant instantly--she was thinking of Rowanpaw. But then she shook it away with a flick of her ear and gave a consenting nod. He fell in step with Hickoryclaw, trying to ignore the prickling in his pelt. As they went up the rocks, he couldn't help but look back into the clearing, finding Birchsplash's gaze. The tom stared at him for a few moments, eyes unreadable, then he looked away.

With a small sigh, Blazepaw followed the patrol. He knew many of the Clan looked at him differently--mainly Hawktail and Birchsplash--because of what happened with Rowanpaw, and even though what he had done was wrong, he knew his brother well enough that he had a reason. Though, Blazepaw wasn't sure if he would've had the strength to do the same thing.

He followed the warriors down the drop from camp and into the snowy pine forest. It was snowing lightly, sprinkling flakes that softly rested upon his skin. He hoped Rowanpaw had a den away from the cold--he must be freezing with no cats around him to create warmth.

"Blazepaw, you've hunted in the new forest, right?" Hazelfur asked as the cats went along.

"Yeah, Juniperfur has been focusing on me hunting there," he answered quickly. He didn't like CrowClan's forest as much as the pines--the trees were thick and short, constricting his access to the sappy air he knew. There was more undergrowth, too, and roots and vines that were hidden under the snow that he continued to trip over. "I've only caught a vole so far."

"It'll take time to get used to," Leafpelt said kindly. "With unfamiliar territory, we're all learning now."

Blazepaw gave a small nod, continuing after the cats on silent paws. The snow muffled the sounds and smells of the forest, alienating the apprentice from his surroundings. The patrol journeyed in silence, so the apprentice let his mind wander.

Disappointment still sat heavy in his belly from the day that Rowanpaw left. Waking up to find out his brother had left in the night had been devasting for him, and to have to explain to his sisters... Blazepaw could still see the pain of being left behind in their eyes. Meadowkit and Fernkit seemed especially upset that Aspenheart had died--no matter how she treated them, she was still their mother--but Primkit had either done very well at hiding her grief or didn't feel much of it at all. Instead, she had been furious that Rowanpaw was exiled for what he did. The boisterous little she-kit thought he should've been rewarded.

But he's safe, Blazepaw reminded himself. Willowpaw had told him so at the Gathering almost a quarter moon ago. He didn't know how, but the young apprentice had managed to gain Rowanpaw's trust, at least a small bit. Perhaps more trust than Blazepaw had been able to get.

"Pay attention, Blazepaw," Leafpelt called back. He tuned his ears forward, surprised to see they were already at the Old Thunderpath, covered with snow but still obviously there. They passed over into the other forest, the open wind uncomfortable on Blazepaw's fur.

Hickoryclaw kept his nose to the ground, tail flicking softly. Blazepaw was still a little hesitant around the black tom for a reason he didn't quite understand yet. The tom had such a calm yet powerful demeanor, his eyes quiet yet radiating a strong force of knowledge. Blazepaw wasn't scared of him, per se, but instead wary. Hickoryclaw didn't seem to be a cat to mess with.

The smells of the new territory were still slightly strange to Blazepaw's nose, but he was slowly gathering his senses around the new trees and undergrowth. The air here seemed sweeter and thinner, the swirling winds of the moorland seeping through the trees. Hickoryclaw seemed at home, relaxing into the undergrowth with quiet paws, his coat a shadow in the snow. Hazelfur and Leafpelt seemed slightly out of place, the latter even more so. Leafpelt looked slightly worried, her thick tail flicking and her mud-stained legs hesitant on the ground. With a thick layer of snow, it was impossible to see any secret roots or holes that might trip them.

Hickoryclaw suddenly flicked his tail as a warning to fall silent. His whiskers were twitching and his eyes were locked on a fern bush not far away. Blazepaw tasted the air, and through the thick cloud of cold, he smelled the faintest scent of a sparrow.

A moment later, the small bird emerged, giving a small tweet as it searched for food. Its feathered were ruffled from the cold, its wings fluttering about as it hopped from place to place. Hazelfur twitched her tail from side to side, and Leafpelt and Hickoryclaw spread out on either side, keeping a wide berth from the sparrow.

Hazelfur flicked her tail again, telling Blazepaw to stay where he

was, and started forward. Her paws were slow and silent, expertly placed over the ground as she went forward. Her time in the marsh had done well for her, teaching her to step lightly, so she barely even broke the snow. When she was as close as she could get, the young warrior lowered her body into a crouch, tail curled against her side and fur falling perfectly still.

Then she pushed off from the ground, throwing snow in her wake as she soared through the air. The sparrow cried out and took off, only to be swiped from the sky by a lithe black shape. Hickoryclaw landed smoothly, the sparrow dead in his jaws.

Blazepaw stared at the warriors in awe. He had been so distracted on Hazelfur, he hadn't even noticed Hickoryclaw sliding into position to catch the bird after it fluttered up into an open position.

"Nice one," Hazelfur congratulated. Blazepaw muttered agreement, his stomach clenching in hunger as the sparrow's sweet blood filled his scent glands. It felt as if claws were scraping against his stomach, threatening to tear him open.

Hickoryclaw buried the sparrow under a fern bush, packing the snow around it firmly with a paw. After that, they continued on, paws quiet over the snow as they went on with their hunt.

"We'll stop by the river," Hazelfur decided in a soft voice. "We might find something trying to drink," she added after a moment.

Blazepaw followed behind the young warrior with his mouth open for scents. The cold chilled his throat and smothered the scent of pretty much everything--it smelled like cold, though he didn't exactly know how that worked.

"Use your ears," Leafpelt reminded him. "It's almost impossible to scent anything in this weather."

Blazepaw nodded, gratefully closing his mouth and perking his ears as high as he could, turning them outward to let the icy air touch the bare skin inside his ears. For a while, he could only hear their pawsteps, then, in the distance, a small squeak. Hickoryclaw turned his head a moment after Blazepaw did, both toms looking left into

the woods.

Hazelfur noticed, and flicked her tail to Blazepaw, then into the woods. He tried to push down the fear that instantly grew in his chest--he knew he needed to practice his hunting, but to be directed to take charge of the hunt scared him. He wasn't used to actually catching prey, most of the time he just watched. After all, missing prey means some cat will probably starve that day. To be responsible for that... He wanted everything to just disappear so he didn't have to think of it anymore.

He felt a soft tail on his side and realized Hickoryclaw was silently encouraging him onward. Despite his hesitation with the tom, Blazepaw was calmed by his touch. There was this glow of confidence in his eyes that surprised Blazepaw, and he gave a quiet blink of thanks before focusing on the mouse he had noticed.

He heard Hickoryclaw slinking off to surround the mouse from the other side but keeping a good distance, since Blazepaw was already downwind. He slipped underneath some snowy ferns, his belly fur barely touching the snow under paw. His tail brushed against the fronds, sending down a light fall of snow, and he froze. He strained his ears to listen, but the mouse was still in the same spot.

He couldn't see it, but he could hear its heartbeat by now and he knew it was right on the other side of the bush. He had slipped in from the wrong place and he realized his failure. He spied through the ferns as well as he could, spotting a shadow slipping past some bracken. Hickoryclaw was in place. Crouching low, Blazepaw took a small step forward, detecting exactly where the mouse was. He didn't know what direction it was facing, so when he bunched his legs and leaped, he aimed just the slightest bit before the little creature.

The mouse squealed and raced directly away from him, straight into the awaiting paws of Hickoryclaw, who swiped it from the snow, threw it up into the air, and skillfully caught it in his jaws. Blazepaw stared in awe. Hickoryclaw was one of the best hunters he had ever seen! The fact that he was so calm about it made Blazepaw wish he could be like the tom when he was older.

"Brilliant hunt," Leafpelt commented, slipping through the ferns behind Blazepaw.

"That was very smart, Blazepaw," Hazelfur commented. "Instead of trying to catch it yourself when you knew you could miss, you sent it running to a more experienced cat." She gave a soft purr. "A good instinct to have." She flicked her tail and turned away. "Come on, let's see if you can do it again!"

Blazepaw's stomach growled, and he had a small hope that he might be able to eat that night.

Question: What is your opinion on the first chapter of Loyalties Divided? (I hope it was mildly interesting, I know a lot didn't happen)

Chapter Two

Jaypaw sat softly on the snow and watched the sun move through the sky. He didn't like how long his Clanmates had been gone--they should've made it to to the abandoned den and back by now, but the forest around them was silent. Frostfall was in the small den, resting in an uneasy sleep with whimpers and kicks every few moments, tail lashing from side to side. Occasionally, she would cry out Silverstrike's name, sending a fresh wave of grief through Jaypaw's heart--he could still barely believe they had lost Silverstrike.

Acornstar, however, had not made a sound. She wasn't far from Jaypaw, staring upward at nothing with a dark look in her eye. She sat so still sometimes he almost forgot she was there--even her ears and whiskers were as still as stone. She blinked, slow and tired, as if the movement was as troublesome as pushing a boulder up a hill.

Not for the first time, Jaypaw wondered what Ravenpaw had said to the aging leader. She had looked so furious and stern, standing atop the small den in the abandoned garden. But in almost no time at all, Ravenpaw had convinced her to return to EchoClan. Somehow, his delicate littermate had convinced the estranged she-cat to come with them--Jaypaw truly had no idea how his brother was so amazingly smart when it came to talking to cats, despite his obvious anxiety.

Whenever he manages to outwit his anxiety, Ravenpaw can make a great argument, Jaypaw thought to himself. In that moment, he knew he'd do anything to keep his brother safe.

When the sun began to set and the patrol *still* hadn't returned, Jaypaw knew something was wrong. He found himself pacing, circling the tree and creating a rut in the snow, listening to Frostfall's breathing from inside to calm himself. She had woken a few times, crying out for Silverstrike, but now she was in her most restful sleep yet, with whimpers of fear coming less often from her

throat.

Every time he passed around the tree, he could see Acornstar. She was crouching now, tucked tight against the back of the trunk with her ears flat and her eyes closed. She was murmuring under her breath, though he could only make out a few words--the ones she seemed to repeat most was *Redcloud* and *Mudtail.*

His fear of strangers coming upon them was so high, Jaypaw was scared when he first heard pawsteps approaching from the growing shadows. But he quickly recognized the scent of his older brothers, Stonecoat and Shadefur, and he found his bristling pelt relaxing.

Until the scent of their fear flooded his nostrils.

They appeared from the darkness with Rain in front, the three cats looking weary and worn. Their fur was dirty and ruffled, they winced as they walked, and their eyes shone with exhaustion.

"What happened?" he asked, hurrying toward the three, but he stumbled to a terrified stop when he saw no small black shape slipping close behind the patrol. "Wh--where's Ravenpaw?" An unsettling tingle was rushing through his spine, telling him that something was very, very wrong.

The weary cats stumbled into the clearing and collapsed onto their stomachs, struggling to catch their breaths.

"Where is he?" Jaypaw repeated, searching the undergrowth behind them, hoping beyond hope that his brother would appear late, perhaps with some herbs in his jaws. But it was as still as Jaypaw's breath.

"We tried..." Rain whispered, staring at his paws with dark, empty eyes.

Jaypaw thought his heart had stopped, watching the waves of thought rush through the eyes of his older brothers. "The... the dogs?" Jaypaw murmured under his breath. He could imagine the terrifying creatures rushing his small brother, gripping his fur, tearing his flesh from his bone.

"Twolegs," Shadefur said in a dry, lost tone. His claws scraped against the snow. "They came when we were in the garden... They took Ravenpaw..."

"We tried to follow," Stonecoat continued harshly, sounding as if he had no moisture left in his throat. "We followed for so long, we searched everywhere... He's just... gone."

Jaypaw's head spun so violently he stumbled. Ravenpaw was... gone? His brother, his sweet, overly-kind brother that couldn't harm a single thing, had been taken from him? It didn't sound real--how could be be gone, just like that? This journey was supposed to be easy, just fetching the runaway Acornstar and bringing her back to the Clan, but now they had lost two cats; a respected and loyal--though harsh--warrior and a young, innocent medicine cat.

It had not been worth it, not even close.

"We should have never come here..." Jaypaw whispered under his breath.

No cat denied his claim. The warriors were silent, their eyes glistening with lost. They knew he was right.

"I told you before that it was a mistake coming after me." Jaypaw looked over in surprise at Acornstar's voice, feeling as if he was being pulled into the earth to be swallowed whole. "Eagleclaw should've left me to live alone."

"You shouldn't have left in the first place!" Shadefur snapped suddenly, ears flat and tail low. The desperate gleam in his eyes was painful to Jaypaw, and the apprentice knew that his elder brother blamed himself. "It was selfish! You ruined EchoClan for yourself! You should've died seasons ago--it would've been better for everyone!"

Acornstar looked over at him slowly. Her eyes were an emotionless storm. "Of course I should have," she said simply. "But StarClan refuses to let me die. They wish for me to suffer, that's why they have destroyed your patrol. They took your two strongest members to darken your spirit--your leader and your medicine cat. They want

us to suffer." She turned her gaze away and said nothing else.

Jaypaw watched the leader for a long moment. Did she truly have no soul anymore? Was she so careless that she thought only she mattered? He realized quite suddenly that he hated her. He didn't like the feeling of hate, but he knew it was true. Because of Acornstar, he had lost his brother. *No. I haven't lost him yet.*

"We need to go after him," he said to the warriors. "We're going after him, right?"

"Of course!" Shadefur said instantly, casting a glance at Rain, almost daring the large tom to argue.

But Rain's eyes were set with determination. "I will not leave Ravenpaw," he promised. "He reunited me with my kit, introduced me to a new home. We may not be blood, but Ravenpaw is my family, and I will *not* leave him behind."

He may be from MothClan, but he's an EchoClan cat at heart, Jaypaw decided firmly. Rain would help him get Ravenpaw back.

"What are we to do with Frostfall, though?" Stonecoat asked softly. "And Acornstar? We chased that monster for so long, they wouldn't be able to manage it."

"Acornstar can do what she wants," Rain decided firmly. "She can come with or go off on her own, I don't care anymore. This patrol isn't about her anymore. We are saving Ravenpaw and leaving for EchoClan whether she comes or not."

Shadefur and Stonecoat both gave consenting nods, while Acornstar said nothing. She stared at the sky with her tail flicking softly. She whispered something, murmuring quietly to herself.

"And Frostfall.." Rain continued, sounding more hesitant now, "well, I guess it depends on her. If she can't manage to come with us, we will have to choose one cat to stay behind to watch her, though I doubt any cat wants to..."

The cats were quiet for a few moments, then Jaypaw, settling firm on his thoughts, decided, "I'll talk to her, see if I can get her to

understand." After Rain gave a consenting nod, Jaypaw went to the tree and slipped underneath to the small den. Frostfall was still curled up at the back, pressed against the wall with her head tucked close to her chest. Her fur was fluffed and messy, tail flicking back and forth every few moments.

He approached her quietly, letting out a very soft mew to warn her of his presence. Her head instantly jumped up, claws sliding out and eyes wide. A gasp had been caught in her throat, but she relaxed a little when she saw it was Jaypaw, though she was still on edge and her eyes glowed with such a strong grief Jaypaw thought his legs were made of thin branches, bending awkwardly under his weight.

"He's gone," she whispered, eyes rushing with memories. "How could he be gone?" Her tail twisted to cross over her stomach. "He was supposed..." she trailed off, eyes completely lost.

Jaypaw crouched down next to her. "He was a good warrior," he whispered. "One of the best." He knew that Silverstrike could be harsh and outspoken, but he had done everything he could for his Clan. He had died because he wanted to make sure his patrol was safe first, despite his injury. Jaypaw swore to himself that no matter how long he lived, he would make sure to spread the word of Silverstrike's loyalty everywhere he could.

"He truly was..." Frostfall murmured back, her meow cracking in grief.

"Frostfall, listen." Jaypaw had no idea why he offered to do this, he was terrified. "Something happened..." Her ear barely flicked. "Ravenpaw was taken by Twolegs," he croaked, hating to hear the words out loud. *Please, StarClan, don't make me lose my brother...*

Frostfall's eyes slowly turned to him, her tail still wrapped firmly against her flank. "Ravenpaw's gone?" she whispered, something flashing deep within her eyes.

Jaypaw gave a soft nod, unable to vocally confirm. "We need to go after him," he explained.

The she-cat was quiet for a moment, looking at her paws as she

thought. The silence stretched between them, the air falling still as Jaypaw caught his breath. Then, finally, the white she-cat gave a small nod. "We need to find him," she whispered simply, then forced herself onto shaking paws.

Frostfall was already slipping out of the den when Jaypaw finally shook himself out of his shock. He had expected it to be a lot harder than that. He hurried after the she-cat, scrambling out after her. She was still a little unsteady as she made her way to the three warriors, but there was also a determination in her step.

Rain seemed surprised at how soon she appeared, but said nothing about it. "We'll follow our trail from earlier," he told the cats. "We tracked the monster deeper into the Twolegplace before we eventually lost it. Once we reach where we lost it, we can ask around to see if any cat knows where they went."

"You lived here, though, didn't you?" Frostfall asked, her mew slowly clearing, though it still had a harshly dry undertone. Her eyes had a guarded look as she held in her emotions, forcing herself to focus on what was important. "You don't know where they take cats who've been stolen?"

Rain shook his head. "It's happened before, I know that, and usually in that particular monster. But I don't know where they go, a lot of cats don't. I'm hoping that once we're closer to the place they're taken, cats will be more knowledgeable."

"Then get moving," Frostfall ordered with surprisingly strength, her tail flicking to touch her side briefly, as if she was making sure her body was still whole. "We... we need to hurry." Her voice broke for heartbeat, but her eyes were as hard as ever.

Rain didn't seem to think it wise to argue with the she-cat, so he just flicked his tail and led the patrol back into the undergrowth.

Jaypaw kept close, suddenly feeling much smaller than ever before. He brushed against Frostfall's fur a few times, but she didn't move away. The apprentice was glad for the warmth of her coat, and felt even better when Shadefur slowed to take the back of the patrol, protecting Jaypaw's open flank.

And that's when he realized what was wrong.

This whole journey, Jaypaw had focused on keeping Ravenpaw in the middle, making sure his brother was safe. Now he was the smallest member, the one who needed to be protected. Jaypaw didn't have anybody who needed *his* protection anymore. Everything seemed to be much more threatening now.

I just want Ravenpaw back. Everything was always okay when he had Ravenpaw.

Darkness continued to creep closer as the patrol made their way to the Twolegplace, but Rain kept them at a strong pace. The sun had almost disappeared by the time they finally reached the Thunderpath, their fur fluffed to keep out the cold. Only a few monsters were out, their eyes glowing with a bright orange-yellow light that burned Jaypaw's gaze.

Rain led them up the side of the path and into the Twolegplace, past the dark dens where Twolegs were likely beginning to settle for sleep. Rain didn't lead them across the Thunderpath to the destroyed den but instead past it, saying, "Few Twolegs will be out at this time, we should be safe to travel this way. I think I can find a shortcut to get us there faster."

Jaypaw decided that he was fine with whatever Rain wanted to try. His legs were already aching after pacing for so long in the forest, but he knew it was nothing of what his brothers and Rain felt. He could see their exhaustion as if it was a second cat following in their pawsteps, dragging them down toward the snow so they moved slower, weaker. But if they could keep going, so could he.

He didn't care how long it took, he would find his brother.

Chapter Three

Ravenpaw was in a small, dark space with cold, stale air stuffed with cat scent. His only comfort was the small, flat nest in the corner of his tiny hardened-web den, where he had curled up the moment the Twoleg put him in there. He could hear cats around him, but he was unwilling to let his eyes adjust, so instead, he kept them shut tightly.

He had only seen the area briefly, but as far as he could tell it was dully gray and lined with tiny dens like his, made of web-like hardened silver vines with a flat black ground. Fear clawed at his throat squeezed his heart like when his littermates would accidentally crush him, sending all breath from his lungs.

"Hey, kit," a hoarse voice said from somewhere beside him.

With a shiver of surprise, Ravenpaw realized he recognized the voice. He forced his head up, opening his eyes to spy through the darkness. His gaze quickly adjusted, revealing an elder tomcat with thick, messy gray fur and hazel eyes that glowed in the darkness like giant moons. His scent was familiar, though faint, to Ravenpaw's senses.

It was the tom from the park, the one who had helped them track down Acornstar.

"I thought it was you," the tom sighed, briefly licking the back of his paw. "Those eyes confirm it--reminds me of an owl."

Ravenpaw stared at him in shock. "I... I don't understand--where are we?"

"The Trap-den" the old tom replied gruffly, one of his small ears flicking. "Twolegs will take cats without Tallwalkers here and put 'em in a cage--what we're in right now--and either give them away to Tallwalkers, or they send 'em to through the Last Door, and

they're never seen again." He nodded to the end of the rows of cages where a part of the gray wall was colored a dull blue. Ravenpaw didn't know what a "door" was, but he knew he never wanted to go down there.

"Oh, stop scaring the kit, Hail. The only cat going through that door is you." The cat speaking was in the cage on the other side of Ravenpaw, a pretty thick-furred dark tortoiseshell she-cat. Her pale green eyes glowed with kindness. "Don't worry yourself, the Tallwalkers won't send you through there--only the old, mean, or fatally injured. Just play nice whenever a Tallwalker comes and they'll take ya outta here."

"But, I don't wanna be a kittypet!" he insisted instantly. "I need to get back my family!" Anxiety rose harsh in his throat.

"Kittypet?" Hail asked in confusion.

"A cat owned by a Twoleg, or, uh, Tallwalker," Ravenpaw explained quickly, his tail flicking in nervousness.

"Easy, kit," the she-cat chided. "You don't have to be, you just have to play nice so a Tallwalker takes you, then you escape and go free." She looked him up and down for a few moments. "You're scrawny, but Tallwalkers like young cats. I'm sure you'll get out in about a half-moon after the Tallwalkers here check you out."

"I can't wait a half-moon!" Ravenpaw cried fearfully. "My family needs me!"

The she-cat's eyes were soft with sympathy. "I understand, little one, but it's impossible to escape a cage without help."

"Without help?" Ravenpaw clarified. "So there *is* a way out?"

Her eyes went thoughtful. "Hail," she asked the old tom, "are you still helping out Newt?"

"Of course, he's still young," Hail said dismissively, then understanding touched his gaze, and he sighed. "I don't know, Jade. He's skilled, but he's not his mother."

Ravenpaw looked between them both. The she-cat, Jade, noticed his expression. "Newt is a young tom Hail has been helping out since his mother Teera died a few moons ago. Teera was one of the few cats who could find a way in and help a few cats escape."

"Then could Newt help me get out?" Ravenpaw asked Hail anxiously.

"If he could get in here, yes," Hail admitted. "He could probably find a way, knowing him, but he's still young and inexperienced. And he doesn't even know I'm in here."

"Newt's smarter than you're giving him credit for," Jade meowed. "I'm sure he'll be here within a few days."

Hail gave a reluctant sigh. "Well, if he gets in, let's hope it's not too late--for either of us." He looked at the young medicine cat with soft eyes. "If he comes, we'll help you escape."

Ravenpaw gave a soft nod. "Thank you..." he breathed.

"What's your name, kit?" Jade asked.

"Uh, Ravenpaw." He hoped the name wouldn't cause any ties to MothClan, but no hostility lit their gazes.

"Well, Ravenpaw," Jade meowed, "you should get some sleep. It's the best way to make time pass."

He nodded again. "Thank you both," he murmured. Having something familiar around him helped calm his anxiety. Instinctively, Ravenpaw looked upward to try to view the stars, but there was nothing but the bottom of another cage above him. There were no stars in here--he wasn't even sure if StarClan knew where he was. But yet he kept his gaze upward and prayed, *StarClan, please, help me get back to Jaypaw.*

Letting out a shaky sigh, Ravenpaw curled up in the nest he had been given. It was thin and uncomfortable, giving no warmth to his small body. Ravenpaw twisted his tail over his nose, tucking his head down. He missed the softness of Jaypaw's fur against his, of hearing his breathing. He tried to imagine that Jaypaw was really

there with him, pressed against him, comforting him, but when he finally slipped into sleep, he felt more alone than ever.

Ravenpaw opened his eyes to a forest darkened by shadows. The moon shined down strong, but it seemed to create more darkness than shed any bit of light. He looked around, hopeful that he might spy a StarClan cat, but the forest was quiet except for the wind whispering through the leaves, like it was sharing a dire secret it didn't want anybody to overhear.

"Hello?" his voice echoed loudly through the shadows, spreading into the air like a bird launching into flight. "Echo? Berrywhisker?"

Ravenpaw began to wander, trying to sniff the air but finding nothing except for forest smells. No cat appeared to him, no voices whispered through his mind. The trees seemed to stretch ever taller into the air, curling inward as if threatening to topple and crush him in an instant.

He started to move faster, but the trees started to lean even closer, curling like claws, their branches twisting together as the trees continued to bend. And then he was running, his paws skimming over the soil as tried to get away. But the forest never seemed to end. The undergrowth seemed to jump from his path but then instantly tried to trip him as he passed, and now the leaves of the trees brushed against his back.

His legs began to burn, his breath became quick rasping and his heart thudded in his chest. A branch slapped against his shoulders, and he tried to lower himself against the soil, but it slowed his running and more undergrowth attacked his back paws, tripping him and trying to drag him into their thorny depths.

Then he noticed the small entrance to a cave before him, and after that was nothing but twisted tree branches like awaiting claws, begging him to delve into their darkness and feel them tear him apart. With barely any hesitation, Ravenpaw threw himself down into the cave.

Sharp rocks dug into his pads, the stone walls quickly closing in so it brushed against his fur. The tunnel continued to lead steeply downwards, the rocks under his paws becoming smaller and sharper, digging into his soft pads until they broke. He could feel himself slowing, blood soaking the ground whenever he stepped. He fought through the pain, forcing

himself deeper into the darkness, hoping beyond hope that the constricting walls would expand, but they continued to get closer, tightening against his shoulders, forcing his head to lower.

Soon he had to crouch, dragging his stomach over the ground as he struggled forward. There was something pressing on his tail, trying to catch him, but he always managed to stay right ahead of it, fighting for every bit of space. But the stone was so tight around his body he could barely move. He felt a tug on his tail as if a creature was trying to pull him out. He dove deeper, shoving himself so hard against the walls that the stone tore at his pelt, scraping his gentle skin.

He could see nothing, his whiskers were bent against his face, his ears were flattened and bleeding from being cut by hard stone. His paws felt like they were drowning in blood. He could no longer breathe, the air stuffed and harsh in his throat. He gave one final push against the constricting stone, and the pressure became too much. With a weak cry for help, Ravenpaw felt his mind slipping away.

Oh, my poor little baby... I love Ravenpaw, I swear! Sorry for the short Chapter (again), there's just not much to write about for Ravenpaw at the exact moment, but it should pick up quickly. Thank you all for reading the series for so long. I hope you continue to enjoy the torture these poor cats are put through! I promise to StarClan, one day, things will get a little brighter... Maybe... At least for a few moments. Also, thank you ReadingandChillin for being such a dedicated reader!

Question #1: What are your thoughts about Ravenpaw's, uh, predicament?

Question #2: What meanings do you see behind his nightmare?

Chapter Four

Willowpaw woke with a chill in her coat. She blinked open her eyes, shivering, to see that snow had fallen down the tunnel into the apprentices' den. She curled tighter into her nest, wishing she had a littermate to share warmth. But Blossompaw's scent came from the corner of the den in the small nest she had made for herself.

Rock, Lark, and Pine were piled together in a nest closer to the den entrance, but when Willowpaw peaked a glance at them they looked comfy, deep in sleep with their bodies pushed together for warmth. Flamepaw, Featherpaw, and Firepaw looked close to the same as the three newer apprentices, though they were at the best place at the back of the den where they got the most heat.

The young apprentice lay there for a while, listening to the sound of her denmates breathing. In the silence and peace, her mind wandered from the warmth of the den, from the comfort of the clearing, and through the forest. She could imagine herself walking back to Rowanpaw's den, seeing his sleeping form.

Her last visit to the tom had only been yesterday, but it felt like much longer than that. It had been quick, too. She had only spoken to him for a few minutes before she led him to his den and cleaned his dirty fur until he had fallen asleep. She had stayed with him for a while, just making sure he was okay, before slipping out once her allowed time by Pebblepeak was over.

She liked Rowanpaw, despite his cold exterior, she knew he had a kindness inside even though he tried to hide it--much like Blossompaw. They both just needed to get over themselves. Willowpaw was convinced if she could save one of them, she could save the other. And for a reason she didn't understand, she felt more connected to Rowanpaw than she did her own sister.

Eventually, Willowpaw couldn't handle just laying in her nest anymore. She needed to move, send warmth through her body

before she froze solid. She forced herself from her nest, shook moss from her coat, and crawled up out of the den, slipping on the snow a few times. The air was cold and sharp down her throat, the sky bright and blinding in the early dawn light.

As it was just past dawn, none of the Clan had the courage to leave the warmth of their den. The only cat out--besides Willowpaw--was Petaldust, the young tortoiseshell warrior shivering at the camp's forest entrance. He looked over as Willowpaw appeared, and gave a kind nod, a light appearing in his tired green gaze.

Willowpaw returned the gesture before going over to the waterfall in front of the leader's den. It was a small cascade of water, but let up plenty of spray into the air. It chilled her coat, but she took a few grateful laps of water, feeling it fill her belly with ice. Once her thirst was sated, she stretched out her cramped muscles, then padded for the nursery.

She slipped her head inside, checking over the cats and feeling the warmth fill her ears. Maskdapple had just begun sleeping in the den at Petaldust's insistence, and Mossrain had agreed with his younger brother. The toms had decided that at Maskdapple's age, she had to keep up her strength or she could risk her kits. It had taken a lot to get the she-cat to agree, but eventually she saw sense enough to take it easy.

She wasn't the only new cat to join the nursery. Oakcloud was curled against Goldenpool's back, his nose nuzzled deep into her fur. Her three kits--plus Maple, whom she was looking after--were tucked deep into her stomach fur. Oakcloud had refused to leave his mate's side because a few days ago, Mossrain had found a strange growth on her flank, a bump that sat under her coat like a stone covered by moss. She claimed it didn't hurt, but it didn't stop the fear in the Clan about what the strange new illness meant.

Not wanting to wake the cats, Willowpaw retreated back into the cold clearing and searched around, deciding on what she should do. Finally, her eyes landed on where the Clan stored their fresh-kill, a small indent in the stone wall that protected the back half of their camp. It sat empty except for a shriveled shrew, no fatter than a stick.

Fresh-kill was always nice to wake up to. Her mind set, Willowpaw made her way to Petaldust, trying to shake warmth into her coat as she did so. "How's the weather?" she asked as he went up to him.

The tom shook snow from his coat with a shiver. "I think my paws are frozen to the ground," he answered, his tail wrapped tight around his legs. "What are you doing up so early?" he added. "The dens are much warmer."

"Not when you're in a nest alone," Willowpaw responded, "and also, I couldn't really sleep. I thought I'd go out on an early hunt."

Petaldust's eyes lit with interest. "Mind if I come? I'd love to catch something fresh for Maskdapple--I want her strength up." The spark of love in his eyes seemed to flood warmth through his body.

"Well, I was going to ask you to tell Pebblepeak I was leaving, but I'd prefer the company." Willowpaw felt comforted by the thought that she wouldn't be going out alone. She was still young, and having an experienced hunter would be useful.

"Don't worry, I need to find a replacement for my watch anyway. Be right back." He got up and stretched gratefully, padding through the clearing with stiff movements, still shivering uncomfortably. He disappeared inside the warriors' den, and Willowpaw took the time to clean her coat, enjoying the warmth from her tongue.

Soon Petaldust appeared from the den, Brightflower appearing right after him. He looked more comfortable as he headed over, his body waking up from his long vigil. "Mind if I come?" Brightflower asked as she reached the apprentice.

"Boulderclaw said he'll be out in a little to take over watch--said it's good to leave," Petaldust added.

"Great! Uh, why don't you take the lead? You know better, after all." Willowpaw stepped aside so the tom had a clear way to the camp entrance.

Petaldust looked happy to take charge, and Willowpaw even more so. She didn't need to be in control, she'd rather follow along.

Petaldust led the two she-cats down the rocky path and into the snow-covered forest. As their paws touched the snow and shards of ice raced through their legs, the tom asked, "so, moor or forest?"

"We should try moor," Brightflower suggested. "Rabbits try to use the morning thaw to scavenge--and we don't want to distract the dawn patrol."

Willowpaw thought the decision was settled, but Petaldust looked back at her. "What do you think?"

Surprised at her inclusion, Willowpaw instinctively answered, "moor." She liked the open air more than the constricting undergrowth, and the freedom of racing over the open fields sent such strong flares of satisfaction through Willowpaw, sometimes she felt as if she was flying.

They traveled along the mountain's edge that held their camp far above the ground. Willowpaw glanced up, proud to know her Clan was safe. Pebblepeak had taught her about the camp, showed her every bit of the clearing. She didn't like the tunnels that led from the back of the camp into the territory, but that just caused him to bring her through them even more.

Soon they left the trees behind and the freezing wind twisted at Willowpaw's pelt, filling her lungs and making her feel lighter than ever before. The three, now no longer restrained by undergrowth, quickened their steps to a steady lope. Willowpaw felt her chest expand, air filling her body and making her feel so much stronger. She started to run faster, and the two older cats followed her instantly.

Her mind went clear and her problems washed away. She thought of nothing but the open moor in front of her. Her paws drummed over the ground, throwing up slush. She could hear the breath of Brightflower and Petaldust by her side. For now, they weren't hunting, they were just enjoying their freedom.

Eventually, though, Willowpaw's muscles began to burn and her chest constricted. Regretfully, she began to slow, breathing hard into the cold air. When she finally slowed to a stop her sides were

moving sharply and her body felt hot with energy.

"What a way to start the morning," Brightflower gasped, her pelt glowing against the endless snow. Her eyes shined the shade of ferns reflected in a calm river, gazing around the moorland with blazing excitement.

"I think there's a group of rabbits not far from here," Petaldust managed out, still trying to catch his breath. His head was slightly lowered, but his gaze was bright and ready. "My patrol yesterday chased them into nearby burrows. They might still be hanging around."

With the she-cats in agreement, Petaldust led them onward over the moor, his breathing soon calming to a regular, steady beat. Clouds of cold came from their muzzles, chilling their whiskers. Willowpaw was pretty sure her pads were developing a layer of ice.

Soon they came upon a low hollow patched with heather and tall grass. Next to a large boulder was a small hole leading under the snow. Petaldust sniffed at the entrance, his ears flicking uneasily. "I don't recognize this smell," he muttered.

Brightflower joined him, and Willowpaw hurried to join them, curious about what they could smell. She knew she wouldn't recognize it, but it would be good to know it for the future. The scent was definitely a strange one, strong but also soft, like the creature didn't have much of an odor at all. It reminded her of dry soil and leaves with a hint of mouse fur.

"There's rabbit scent, too," Brightflower murmured. "It smells like they were scared."

Petaldust leaned into the burrow, sniffing the dirt that was untouched by the snow. He looked at the hardened ground, running his paw along it. "They fled from here, out to the moor. Something hunted them from the tunnel."

Willowpaw's pelt prickled, and she self-consciously took a small step back. She noticed Brightflower joined her, with only Petaldust staying at the tunnel entrance. "We should get back to camp and get

someone who might know what this is," Petaldust meowed. "Whatever chased these rabbits could be dangerous."

"Some cat needs to stay behind," Brightflower pointed out. "In case it leaves the burrow."

Petaldust nodded his understanding, quiet for a moment while he thought. "Brightflower, run back to camp and find a cat to help. Willowpaw and I will keep watch."

Brightflower hesitated for a moment, then nodded consent and hurried off. Willowpaw was confused on why Petaldust left her here, but decided not to worry about it and settled down to wait. Petaldust sat, gazing down the burrow with quite the determined gaze. His body was tensed, ready to leap into action.

Willowpaw realized that he had grown into quite the powerful warrior, despite his young age. He had the same strong body as his mother, but the long, lithe legs of Silverstrike, his father; a good mix for both a moorland hunter and a forest hunter.

For a while they sat in silence, listening to the wind whistle through the heather. Then Petaldust shifted, his tail flicking softly. "Do..." Petaldust was quiet for a moment, obviously trying to find the right words. "Are you..." He let out a sigh, obviously fighting a struggle in his mind. "Are you... close to Boulderclaw?"

Willowpaw tilted her head. "Uh, yeah, I mean, he's my father."

Petaldust nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah, of course." He had a tone of quiet understanding, but a question was still on his tongue. "Um, did he...say goodbye, when he left with the patrol?"

Guilt touched Willowpaw's chest when she remembered the day the cats left to find Acornstar. She had pressed close to Boulderclaw and he had comforted her, but Silverstrike hadn't bid goodbye to his family--he had been cold, distant. She could see the question in the young warrior's eyes, the fear.

"Silverstrike loves you, Petaldust," Willowpaw said softly. "He just doesn't know how to admit it. Just wait 'til he comes back, he'll be

happy to see you."

The tom looked down at the snow. "I hope so." A brief gleam of happiness touched his gaze. "I'm excited to have new siblings," he said softly. "I can help Maskdapple raise them... See if... if I'd be a good father one day..."

Willowpaw didn't want to point out Petaldust was quite young to be thinking of having kits, but after a few moments she realized what he meant--he was scared that, since Silverstrike didn't pay too much attention to him, he wouldn't know how to be a father. Finally, she told him softly, "I'm sure you will be."

He cast her a brief glance of appreciation, then sighed again, shaking out his coat. "Cold out here. Think Brightflower will be back soon?" He cast his gaze in the direction of camp. The mountain was far off, and the approach of cats was hidden by the steep up and down slopes of the moorland.

"Hopefully. I think my paws will freeze if it takes much longer." She lifted one paw and licked her pad to warm it, wishing her coat was thicker to protect her more from the cold.

Petaldust pricked his ears, sitting up straighter. He stared deep into the darkness of the burrow, leaning his head forward. Willowpaw kept silent and leaned closer, trying to hear what the tom was. It took a few moments, but then she realized there was a very light scratching sound, like claws moving dirt.

"Something's down there..." Petaldust whispered, standing slowly and stepping closer to the tunnel. His head peeked through the opening, his muzzle opening to scent the stale air in the burrow entrance.

Without any warning, a tiny shape flew out from the tunnel and attached itself to Petaldust's throat. It was a blur of movement, Petaldust stumbling back with a gurgled cry as he tried to fight free, clawing at the small wiggling creature. Willowpaw was frozen for just a moment before she jumped forward, wrapping her teeth around the little creature's back. Blood filled her throat and soaked down her chest.

The small creature released Petaldust and tried to attack her, but the injured warrior was not ready to be left behind and grabbed his attacker's head in his muzzle and bit down, *hard*. The little monster fell limp. Willowpaw dropped it with a gasp, stumbling back and staring at the creature. It was small with a long, thin body and small legs. Its fur was thin and dense, brown on the top and white on the bottom.

"What is this thing?" Petaldust coughed, blood rushing down his chest. He stumbled slightly, and Willowpaw hurried to him. She forced him to raise up his muzzle, looking closely at his wound. She wasn't a medicine cat, but she could see that he had been lucky--*very* lucky. The... whatever it was hadn't actually bitten his throat but instead high on his chest, just the smallest bit too low to be fatal.

It was still bleeding, though. Willowpaw began to lick the wound with the end of her tongue, muzzle curling at the taste of blood and the feel of the broken flesh. She brushed away his fur and continued to clean the injuries until the blood finally began to slow. She leaned back, letting out a deep breath to catch some air in her lungs.

"Thanks," Petaldust rasped, the blood instantly quickening its flow again when he spoke.

Before Willowpaw could lean forward again, two cats appeared on the nearby ridge. They ran smoothly over the snow, one small and slim with a coat of mismatched black and ginger, and the other a familiar, muscular frame of a gray and white tom.

Willowpaw wouldn't want any other cat coming to help them.

Boulderclaw was barely panting by the time he came to slow by the cats. The first thing he did was brush his side against Willowpaw's, then he looked briefly at Petaldust's wound, then his eyes fell on the small creature. Surprise flickered through his eyes, and his fur rose warily.

Brightflower anxiously nosed her way close to her littermate, sniffing at his wound with a lashing tail, but the young warrior

stepped away, closer to Boulderclaw. "What is it? Is it dangerous?"

"If there's more, extremely," Boulderclaw answered, moving over to the tunnel and sniffing deeply at the entrance. "It's called a stoat--evil little things, I can say that much."

"Didn't stoats attack the nursery once?" Brightflower asked fearfully, raising her scared eyes to the older warrior.

"Yes. They killed Goldenpool's mother and littermates before the warriors stopped them, though they've returned to the territory every so often after that. It's been quite a few seasons since they last came, though. They move fast and attack hard. They can overpower cats easily." He stepped away from the tunnel. "We need to report this to Eagleclaw, and Petaldust, you need to visit Mossrain right away. Stoat bites can become infected as easily as rat bites if untreated."

He nosed the young cats away from the burrow, keeping Willowpaw in front of him the whole time. They were unable to run because of Petaldust's wounds, but halfway home Boulderclaw disappeared into an old badger sett and reappeared with some cobwebs. They were able to move on faster after they were plastered over Petaldust's neck.

By the time they climbed up the pathway to the clearing snow had begun to fall, soft and slow. A few cats had appeared by now, sharing tongues in the clearing. Oakcloud had appeared from the nursery as well with his three kits and Maple, letting them chase each other around the clearing to push their playmates into the snow.

He looked over as the four cats padded into the clearing, and raised himself up, anxiety flashing in his handsome gaze. "What's happened?" He was looking at Petaldust's wounds.

"Let me report to Eagleclaw and she can tell the Clan," Boulderclaw told the other warrior. Oakcloud looked hesitant, then he gave a consenting nod and called his kits over to him, allowing them to stay in the clearing but at a closer distance.

Boulderclaw led the three young cats across the clearing to the waterfall. He peered behind it, but the den seemed empty to her.

"She's in the medicine cat's den," Pebblepeak called, washing his fur by the Rock Pile with Thorntail. "Petaldust, you alright?"

The young tom nodded as he followed Boulderclaw to the medicine cat's den. Willowpaw, after a hesitation, decided to follow the group. She had a feeling Mossrain wouldn't want Petaldust speaking.

"Brightflower, why don't you take Pebblepeak and Thorntail out hunting--go to the forest, by the Gathering Hollow. Keep away from the moor." Boulderclaw watched the young she-cat until she nodded consent, then he flicked his tail for Petaldust and Willowpaw to follow him inside the medicine cat's den.

It was surprisingly warm, the scent of herbs strong in the air. Mossrain and Eagleclaw sat at the storage, the young medicine cat sorting through his herbs with strong attention.

"--have been gone too long," Eagleclaw was saying. "I'm worried something is wrong..."

"Eagleclaw? Mossrain?" Boulderclaw meowed respectfully. When the cats looked over, he dipped his head.

Mossrain instantly noticed Petaldust's wound, and stood quickly. "Nest, now," he ordered, gesturing with his tail to a premade nest. Petaldust padded over and sat down, winching slightly. Mossrain pawed through his herbs with flattened ears. "What happened?"

"Willowpaw." Boulderclaw turned to look at his daughter, taking a step away so the medicine cat and deputy could see her clearly. "Explain what happened." His words were kind but firm, and his eyes glowed with a soft, comforting gleam.

"Petaldust brought me and Brightflower to the far edge of the moor to a rabbit burrow, but they had fled and there was a strange scent. Brightflower went to fetch Boulderclaw, and we heard something from the tunnel. A, um, what was it?" She looked at Boulderclaw.

"A stoat," he reported sadly. Mossrain, who had moved to Petaldust, looked over uneasily, while Eagleclaw sighed and closed her eyes briefly to shut out the world.

"Yeah, a stoat. Uh, it attacked Petaldust, but I pulled it off and we killed it. That was it." She wished she had more to tell her deputy, but Eagleclaw nodded softly.

"Thank you, Willowpaw. Did you see any others, or was it just the one?"

"Only the one," Willowpaw responded quietly.

"We'll need to send a patrol to explore the burrow," Eagleclaw muttered after a few moments. "I can bring--"

"Eagleclaw," Boulderclaw said softly, "if there are stoats under there, we could be in trouble. It's not wise for you to go." He spoke respectfully but with wisdom of age and experience. He wasn't that much older than the deputy, but it was obvious the she-cat looked up to the tom.

"He's right," Mossrain called without looking over. "We lose you, we lose EchoClan."

"I know, I know," Eagleclaw sighed again. Willowpaw could see the stress in the she-cat's eyes. "Okay. Okay." She spoke slow, her eyes unfocused. Then she let out a short breath and squared her shoulders. "Okay. Boulderclaw, you lead Snowfern, Foxpounce, and Pebblepeak into that burrow. Make sure there are no more stoats. Mossrain, you keep Petaldust here until he is good to go out. We don't need a meeting to spread word of the stoats, there aren't enough cats right now that it matters. Let cats know what's going on, but don't let anyone freak. I'll take... Yes, I'll take out all the apprentices to the Gathering Hollow and practice some hunting and fighting there, Brightflower can join me. I want Grayblaze and Thorntail in camp keeping guard."

Boulderclaw nodded understanding. "I've sent Brightflower out with Pebblepeak and Thorntail hunting. Do you want them fetched back?"

Eagleclaw hesitated for a moment, then she shook her head, determination set in her gaze. Willowpaw realized that the she-cat was going off instinct at this point. "No, let them hunt. Send Snowfern and Foxpounce with the oldest apprentices for a quick hunt. We can all eat once they return, then follow the plan." She looked over at Boulderclaw, a question in her eyes--*does that sound good?*

Boulderclaw blinked softly. "Consider it done." He dipped his head goodbye to the deputy and medicine cat and slipped out from the den.

"Willowpaw, I have a request for you," Eagleclaw meowed softly.

Willowpaw looked instantly at her deputy, anxiously ready for what she was needed for.

Eagleclaw's gaze was softly worried. "I need you to tell the cats in the nursery what has happened. Please inform them--Goldenpool especially--that there will now be a guard day and night on the moorland entrance, and a patrol is being sent to make sure there are no stoats in the territory. The clearing is safe from danger."

Willowpaw nodded swiftly. She didn't know what to say in farewell, so she just turned and left without a word. *Was that disrespectful? Should I go back?* She paused at the den entrance for a moment, then shook her head clear and hurried to the nursery. Eagleclaw had enough to deal with--Willowpaw was sure that the deputy had more to care about than an informal goodbye.

Oakcloud had retreated to the nursery with the kits, and when she entered the four kits were creating a fluffy pile on top the brown warrior, squealing and laughing in enjoyment. "Take that, fox!" Stormkit yowled as her small paws wrapped around her father's muzzle.

"He's a badger!" Heatherkit insisted, pummeling the large tom's side.

Maple was too busy crouching on Oakcloud's flank, eyes locked on his flicking tail. Dustkit was trying to trap his father's front legs, his breathing harsh from his fight.

"Welcome, Willowpaw," Goldenpool greeted softly. Her voice seemed dry, and Willowpaw wondered if she was getting enough water.

"Uh." Willowpaw realized she hadn't planned on what to say. "Eagleclaw wants you to know that on the far end of the moor, a stoat attacked Petaldust and I," she explained softly.

Fear instantly flooded Goldenpool's eyes, and her gaze snapped to her kits. Oakcloud raised his head, leaving Stormkit to tackle the ground with an upset squeal.

Maskdapple raised her head from her nest. "Is Petaldust okay?" she asked in alarm.

"He got bit on his throat, but Mossrain didn't seem worried," she explained quickly. "And Eagleclaw is ready to protect more cats from getting hurt," she added to Goldenpool. "Cats are hunting now, but after Boulderclaw is leading a patrol to make sure there are no more stoats, and she promises there will be a constant guard on the moorland entrance. No stoat is getting anywhere near the camp."

"What of the tunnels?" Goldenpool murmured. "The escape way behind the nursery? A stoat is small enough to get through, especially with leaf-bare killing the brambles!"

Oakcloud murmured to the kits to send them to the back of the nursery to play, then he moved to his mate and gave her a reassuring lick on the cheek. "I'll be here," he told her softly. "I'll keep you all safe, my dear."

"And I'll talk to Eagleclaw about weaving more brambles on the tunnel entrance," Willowpaw promised. Goldenpool gave a soft nod, shifting in her nest. Her muzzle curled briefly, her movements looking stiff. Willowpaw bid a soft goodbye to the cats and hurried back into the clearing. Her timing was perfect--Eagleclaw was just emerging from the medicine cat's den.

The apprentice hurried over, dipping her head in respectful greeting. "Goldenpool is worried about the tunnel behind the nursery," she explained.

Eagleclaw looked thoughtful, giving a slow nod. "I can see that. When we all go out to the Gathering Hollow, we'll find plenty of brambles to bring back and weave into the barrier. Is that all?" she added, obviously noticing Willowpaw dance from paw to paw.

"Goldenpool looked uncomfortable in her nest--I thought we could find some materials to help her, and maybe if we found some birds we could use feathers, too."

Eagleclaw gave a soft purr. "I think that's a great idea, Willowpaw. We can do that, too. Now, go get some rest in your den, and tell the other apprentices about the stoats and all of us going out later. And warn them if any apprentice leaves camp without permission, I'll use their pelts to line not only my nest, but Goldenpool's too. We don't need any heroes--stoats are dangerous, and they can kill."

Dipping her head briefly, the deputy passed by the apprentice and leaped expertly over the stones, past the waterfall, and into her den.

I felt bad about the shorter chapters so I tried to make this one longer, and I hope it was interesting. Thank you for reading this series and sticking around for my awful schedule. There aren't many of you reading right now, but it makes me so happy to know that even just a few people are enjoying enough to deal with the wait.

Chapter Five

Jaypaw's dreams were a flurry of movement. They flashed briefly, twisted with shadows and blurred like he was sick and dizzy. He saw Ravenpaw's face briefly, lost in the dark as the young tom cried for help. His eyes, two wide moons, reflected fear and pain. Jaypaw couldn't find his own body, so he couldn't approach his brother. He couldn't feel his paws or his tail, nor could he make any noise to call Ravenpaw closer.

His vision then shifted, and he saw a flash of Willowpaw and Blossompaw, surrounded by thick undergrowth crawling with cats made of shadow. His sisters were bloody and beaten, backed against each other with weakening stances.

Jaypaw tried to fight toward them, but it was as if his consciousness didn't even exist, no freedom to move or speak. The only part of him that was there were his eyes and mind, and he found himself pleading with StarClan to give him something, anything, to let him help.

He swirled through the black like wading through a thick river, finding himself back at the abandoned Twoleg den. He remembered gazing up at the fence, seeing the fear in Silverstrike's eyes a moment before he disappeared, his claws scratching over the wood. The howling of the dogs was twisted and slurred, a low drawl that mixed with the dark air.

"Jaypaw," a dark, milky voice hissed in his ear. "Wake," it ordered drily.

Jaypaw blinked his eyes open. Early dawn shone above the tops of the Twoleg dens, pale orange twisting to blue. The patrol was stirring around him. Rain had found a place to sleep in a place he called an alley, a small space between two large Twoleg dens. Though, these weren't normal Twoleg dens. They were larger and flat on the top--Rain didn't know exactly what they were, but Twolegs would visit during the day. At night they were empty, so it was a safe space to rest near.

"We need to get moving," Rain meowed, shaking out his coat. "Twolegs will start to appear soon--we should be gone by then."

"What's our plan?" Shadefur questioned with a yawn, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. His ear slapped Stonecoat on the cheek.

"We know the monster with Ravenpaw came in this direction. Our best bet is to try to find a kittypet or loner who might know where he was taken. I've only came here once, and it was a long time ago, so I'm almost as blind as you are. We'll just have to hope we take the right turns."

Frostfall got slowly to her paws. Her eyes were dull and downcast, not all that interested in the conversing cats. Her eyes flashed with memories, and Jaypaw was pretty sure she was remembering--not for the first time--the dog attack. Jaypaw was upset he had never noticed the closeness between the two warriors.

"Is there anything to eat around here?" Stonecoat asked Rain as he stretched out his muscles, readying himself for their journey. Jaypaw stood and briefly cleaned his fur, trying to ignore how weak he still felt. Yesterday they had walked with barely any rests, and it had taken a toll on the young tom. But determination kept him upright.

"Rats and mice are pretty common, especially early in the day. If we get desperate, there are other ways to find food, as well." Rain padded over to a strange object, a tall rounded boulder that shined silver. "Twolegs fill these with things that they don't want, including food. Some of it can be eaten, though I would recommend using that as a last resort." His lips curled briefly.

Shadefur muttered something in Stonecoat's ear, and the tom responded by shoving his brother away with a groan. "Come on, we should head." He started down the alley, and Rain hurried to lead the way. Monsters rumbled slowly by, coming only occasionally. A few Twolegs traveled down on the edge of the Thunderpaths on what Rain called walkways.

Rain kept the cats at a steady pace along the Thunderpath, keeping by the front of the Twoleg dens to give a little distance from the monsters as they raced past, sending up slush. Jaypaw was not keen to be hit by the dirty snow, so he walked beside Shadefur with his brother closer to the Thunderpath. He didn't seem to mind, as he

and Stonecoat had been watching Jaypaw very closely since they entered the Twolegplace, as if they were scared of losing another brother.

He didn't like his brothers thinking he needed to be protected, but he did feel much more comfortable in the strange environment with them by his side. Which was helpful, since this part of the Twolegplace was crossed with Thunderpaths everywhere. They could only go so far before facing a new path, and the cats were getting better at crossing over. Rain would pause them at the edge, look both ways, then race across.

For the next few hours, the day worked on repeat--Rain would lead them across a Thunderpath and they would search for any sign of a cat, but Rain had already warned them there weren't as many cats around here, and he was right. From the time they woke at sunrise to when they finally settled to rest in a new alley at sunhigh, they had only found one cat, who was gone the moment they spotted her. She was small and lithe and full of energy, and she disappeared around a corner with no sign of where she had gone.

Jaypaw looked up from his thoughts when Rain appeared with Stonecoat and Shadefur. The three had gone off to hunt, and now they returned with two rats and a mouse respectively. Rain sat down his rat and split it in half, giving the larger piece to Frostfall before settling to eat the rest himself. Stonecoat did the same with Jaypaw, while Shadefur enjoyed a mouse that was surprisingly plump--though he did nip a few morsels from Stonecoat's meal.

After they finished, Jaypaw started to clean his fur, wishing that his muscles would stop burning. Stonecoat and Shadefur were cleaning each other, but then Shadefur looked over at Rain, who had been sitting by himself, looking quite thoughtful. "Do you think we'll find that she-cat again?" he asked.

Rain was quiet for a moment. "No, she'll be long gone. The rogues don't come in this deep, I'm sure many cats around here don't even know who they are, but they still don't like outsiders. Strangers mean trouble, so cats keep to themselves. We'll just have to keep searching until we find a cat brave enough to face us."

"And we pray to StarClan they know where Ravenpaw might be," Stonecoat murmured.

Rain gave a slow nod of agreement, but he said nothing.

The cats rested for a while longer before they headed out. Frostfall looked about as exhausted as Jaypaw felt, but she still looked healthy, and she walked strong despite herself. But the going was not easy. Every so often a Twoleg would walk by with a dog, and the cats would flee at top speed to make sure they get away. Though the dogs never followed, the patrol would run until their barks faded away. By the third time, Jaypaw thought his pads were raw.

Then, a stroke of luck. A tomcat appeared from an alley, a plump brown tabby cat barely fully grown. He had a bright vine around his neck, a collar, Rain had called it. The mark of a kittypet. Rain paused for a moment, gesturing the patrol back while he went forward. "Hello?" he called. The young tom jumped, fur on end, and faced Rain with wide eyes. He froze, his ears flattening and his fur beginning to rise. "Please, I don't want trouble." Rain's mew was light and soft. "I need hel--"

The tom took off down the walkway, dodging under a Twoleg and sending them yelping away in surprise. Rain growled in frustration, but Shadefur was not ready to give up. With no warning, he shot away faster than a hungry cat chasing a rabbit over a sloping moor. The rest of the patrol hared after him, but Shadefur disappeared around a corner after the kittypet, quickly followed by a screech of surprise.

When the patrol caught up and turned the corner, Shadefur had the fat kittypet pinned against the ground. He wiggled like a trapped mouse, hissing and thrashing. He said nothing, instead scratching at the ground in an attempt to crawl away. Shadefur held him easily under a paw.

"Calm down!" Rain called, slowing next to the cats.

"I don't think that will help," Shadefur pointed out angrily, holding tighter as the tom tried to get his back legs under his plump

haunches.

"No, you calm down, Shadefur. He's just scared." Rain's mew was calm and controlled, and next he spoke to the kittypet. "We're not with the rogues, we're just looking for a friend."

The tom stopped instantly, turning his head to look at Rain skeptically. "You're... You're not?"

"No," Rain meowed, "we're not. Shadefur, let him up, it's fine."

After a moment of hesitation, Shadefur stepped back, releasing the young tabby. He jumped to his paws, making both Shadefur and Stonecoat tense, but he just shook his coat and looked over. His eyes were no longer dark, but bright and humorous. "Sorry about that! You look just like the rogues! Though I guess they don't often come this deep, and you let me go! They never do that!"

Rain let out a soft sigh, eyes flashing briefly with sadness. "I'm sorry, we just need information. We're not from around here, and we lost a friend--a young tom, black with yellow eyes like an owl's. He was stolen by Two--Tallwalkers. We just want to find him so we can go back home."

"Well that's not very nice of them," the little tom pointed out. "I've heard of it happening, but I can't really remember anything about it. Oh! Sawyer might know. He's an old cat who lives with me, he knows a lot! He's always happy to talk to strangers! Oh, and I'm Felix, by the way!"

Rain's tail gave a soft flick of uncertainty, but he nodded either way. "We would be grateful if you showed us the way."

"Great!" Felix's tail rose high in the air. "Follow me this way." He turned on his paws and started confidently down the walkway. Rain looked at the patrol briefly, giving a small nod, then he turned and started after Felix. The rest of the cats were quick to follow.

Felix led them confidently through the Twolegplace. He crossed Thunderpaths with barely any hesitation, even once going out in front of a monster racing down the path. Jaypaw had been sure

their guide would be squashed flat, but the monster slowed when it approached, giving plenty of time for the cats to cross. Jaypaw hated seeing it crouch there, rumbling loudly, ready to pounce. But it didn't move until all the cats were across, and it went by peacefully.

"Most Tallwalkers stop if you make sure they can see you," Felix explained brightly, continuing on with a bounce in his step.

"What if it didn't?" Stonecoat asked as he hurried after the tom, his fur still slightly bushed from the strange experience.

Felix tilted his head. "Huh. Never thought of that. Oh, look, we're here." He stopped in front of a Twoleg den--not one where they live but instead visit. Jaypaw was surprised by the strong scent of flowers and herbs coming from the place. "My Tallwalker leaves at night but he's here in the day. Come on in, I'm sure he'll have enough cream for all of you--he loves when I bring cats in. Sawyer used to just visit but he started living here a while ago."

He approached the front of the Twoleg den and slipped through a small opening with a cover of thick, smooth moss. The patrol hesitated. Felix's head popped out. "What's wrong?"

"We don't go in Twoleg dens," Shadefur explained. "We live outside." His eyes looked over the place nervously.

"Don't worry, the inside isn't that big. There's a really pretty garden out back where we cats spend most of our time. If you don't want to go this way, there's a way through the alley. Just climb over the fence." He nodded the direction they needed to go. "See you out there!" His head disappeared again.

"Are you sure about this?" Stonecoat asked Rain, looking hesitant. Rain had a similar look, but then he set his face firmly.

"Yes. This could be our way to find Ravenpaw." Without another word, the tom padded down the walkway to the alley. The others were quick to follow, ducking into the small tunneled area with no delay--it was nice to be out of sight of Twolegs. The alley, like most others, went on for a while before opening to another Thunderpath,

but halfway down the length the Twoleg den ended and was replaced by a tall oak fence.

For a moment, even Rain hesitated. The patrol had not had good luck with fences so far on their journey. Then the large gray tabby shook his head and, bunching his shoulders, leaped for the fence. He hooked in his claws halfway up and swarmed up the rest of the way. Shadefur and Stonecoat had Jaypaw go up between them.

It was surprisingly steady, staying still as he climbed up. He pulled himself onto the top, finding the wood was quite thick. The other side of the fence was a surprise to him. The Twolegplace had felt gray, and the beauty before him reminded him of the forest. It was a small space enclosed with fences, but there were trees and bushes and many flowers, with a small stream flooding into a pond. Even from here, he could see sparkling scales of fish, though they looked orange, which was different from the usual silver he saw flashing through streams. Snow coated the ground but the river was unfrozen, to Jaypaw's surprise.

Felix already sat in the garden, tail wrapped around his paws. "Welcome! This is a little paradise for those who need it! Cats visit a lot, though many keep to themselves. Come on, I'll introduce you to Sawyer."

Rain jumped down first, but he waited for the rest of the patrol to follow before going onward after the plump tabby. He led them to the corner of the garden, where a fern bush overshadowed a part of the pond. Under the fronds sat an older tom. He had gray fur with white paws and muzzle. His green eyes were slightly dull, but watched the newcomers warily.

"Felix, you seem to forget I ask not to have visitors," the old tom meowed. His mew was slightly hoarse, but he looked like he was in good health. Jaypaw, standing close to the pond, realized there was a very slight heat coming from it. Unable to help himself, he leaned down for a drink, and found the water was almost warm. He didn't know how, but he understood that the Twolegs had somehow heated the water to keep it unfrozen.

Maybe they were smarter than he gave them credit for.

"Sorry, Sawyer, they were just hoping to find their friend! I was sure you could help them out!" He sat happily on the snow, licking a paw and rubbing it over his ear.

Sawyer cast Rain a questioning look. "Got separated?" he asked.

"He was taken by Tallwalkers," Rain answered calmly with an air of respect in mew. "We're not from around here, so we're unfamiliar with where he might've been taken."

Sawyer gave a slow nod. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'm afraid I don't really have good news. I've never been to the Trap-den, but other cats have--when Tallwalkers find cats without a home, they bring 'em there. They're locked up until a Tallwalker takes them home to be a housecat. I don't know where it is, but I do know one thing--once in, you can't get out without a Tallwalker. I only know one cat who could get in there, and she died a few moons back."

Jaypaw felt his heart sink lower and lower until it crashed against the snow.

"There must be a way!" Shadefur insisted, lashing his tail in fear.

Sawyer gave a sad shake of his head. "I'm sorry, truly, but Teera never gave up her secret of getting in--she only said it was a pain. Cats have tried to copy what she did--even those she's gotten out before--but they all get caught and put in cages inside the Trap-den. Even if you found the place, you'd have no way to rescue your friend. He's got to fend for himself, now."

"We can't leave him!" Jaypaw cried. "He's... He's Ravenpaw! He doesn't fight, he doesn't hurt anybody, he just wants to help. He doesn't deserve it!"

"What are his chances of getting out by himself?" Rain asked, sounding a little anxious. "If a Tallwalker took him, could he escape from them, do you think?"

"Plenty of cats do it," Sawyer admitted. "Though many Tallwalkers won't let their cats out of their houses, keep 'em close, you know? But cats can't leave the Trap-den right away--they'll be kept in there

for about half a moon, watched to make sure they aren't sick or anything."

"Then we wait," Rain decided immediately. "We find the place he's at and wait until he's taken by a Tallwalker, then we help break him out."

Jaypaw was ready to agree, but a broken mewl sounded behind him. They all turned to Frostfall, who stared at her paws with a wide expression. "We can't..." she whispered weakly. She looked up at them slowly, her eyes as wide as moons. "I... I didn't mean..."

"Frostfall? What's wrong?" Rain spoke softly, comfortingly.

She let out a slow breath to calm herself. "It would be at least a moon before we got to EchoClan, if we waited..." she whispered. "But... I... I need to get home..."

"Frostfall, we can't leave Ravenpaw," Shadefur told her. "What's so important you want to leave our brother?"

She blinked slowly. "I... I need to get home before I have my kits... *Silverstrike's* kits..."

Whelp...

Chapter Six

Ravenpaw woke the next morning with a chill in his coat. The air was still and stale, dry in his throat. He raised a wary head, mind dizzy from his dream. The shadows had been constricting, the tunnel terrifying. Had he really suffocated in the walls of the cave? He shivered, briefly tucking himself deeper into his nest. It wasn't comfortable but it was warm from spending the night pressed into it.

"You cried out in your sleep," Hail commented from his cage, sitting up in his nest. He was cleaning his thick chest fur, eyes glowing in the dim morning light.

"You alright, Ravenpaw?" Jade added. "I can understand being scared, being away from your family and all."

He gave a shaky nod, forcing himself into a slouched sit. "I had a nightmare," he admitted.

"Well, it was just a nightmare, I'm sure," Jade soothed kindly. "No need to worry about it."

"Usually," Ravenpaw murmured, shifting his paws. Most of his dreams were just that--dreams. But many times he had experienced omens and visions, mostly at the Moonstream but a few times just in his nest. He had a tingling of fear in his spine that this might be one of them.

"Have you had dreams come true before?" Hail asked curiously.

Ravenpaw nodded. "I'm from a place called EchoClan," he explained softly. "It's a group of cats who work together. We have a leader and a deputy who lead us, and a medicine cat who heals and advises. I'm training to be a medicine cat..."

"Sounds like an important job," Jade pointed out.

Ravenpaw tried to ignore the anxiety in his chest when he nodded. "I guess it is. Medicine cats are the main tie to our ancestors, StarClan. We talk to them, get visions from them. They've sent me dreams that came true..."

"So you have to be careful with everything you dream," Jade finished when he trailed off. He nodded again. "Well, what's the dream that you had?"

Ravenpaw hesitated. He looked at both the cats, nervous to explain what he had seen. But he pushed it down, swallowed heavily, and explained. He told them of the tall, towering trees, the undergrowth that started to creep closer. He recalled running and running as fast as he could, diving into the cave and escaping downward, feeling his pads tear and the stone press against him until everything faded with a flash of pain.

When he finished, he was shivering in his nest, remembering the terrifying time in the darkness. Jade pressed against her cage side, and Ravenpaw instantly slunk toward her. He leaned against the thin, cold vine edge, feeling the she-cat's warm side and instantly becoming comforted. But a strong longing grew in his stomach, and he wished beyond anything that he had Snowfern with him. He missed his mother with everything he had.

"Don't worry, little one. I think your mind is just scared, being in an unfamiliar place. The dark undergrowth is your fear, trying to swallow you. You just need to face it." Her eyes glowed with the soft kindness that only a mother could show.

A loud bang made Ravenpaw jump. He raced back to his nest, his safe place, and ducked inside. A Twoleg traveled down the space between the cages. He stopped in front of Ravenpaw's cage, speaking briefly, before moving one over and opening the front. Jade stood with a stretch, moving forward with a purr.

She rubbed against the Twoleg's paw.

"What's going on?" Ravenpaw whispered, pressing deeper into his nest.

The Twoleg wrapped his paws around Jade and picked her up, pressing her to its chest. "'Bye, Ravenpaw. Good luck!" she called as the Twoleg started back down the pathway.

"Jade's Tallwalkers finally came to get her," Hail explained as the Twoleg left. When Ravenpaw watched the old tom, eyes wide, he clarified, "Jade lives with Tallwalkers, but she wanders a lot and gets brought here about every quarter moon. Sometimes they'll leave her for a few days, but they always come back to get her." He licked one paw and drew it over his ear. "Don't worry, she might be back by the time we leave!" He purred in amusement.

Ravenpaw didn't really find the situation that funny. "Why would she want to be a kittypet?" he asked. To be separated from the forest, from his family, just to live trapped in an enclosed den, listening to what Twolegs told him to do? He shivered at the thought.

Hail shrugged. "It's nicer than you would think. When I was young, I was a kittypet, as you call. It didn't suit me though, I explored more than my Tallwalkers liked. I still miss them on the cold nights."

"You *do?*" Ravenpaw stared at the tom with wide eyes.

"Of course." Hail looked surprised. "My Tallwalkers were like my kin. They fed me and protected me, and I protected them, too. I slept with their kit, and played with them like a littermate. But I liked exploring, and when I wandered too far I was led back home by a street cat. Her name was Bell. She lived far from me, but I wanted to see her again, so I went looking. She saved me from some dogs. We got closer, and she taught me to survive. After a few seasons, I left my Tallwalkers to live with her." During the story a light had lit in his gaze, but it darkened suddenly.

"What happened to her?" Ravenpaw asked softly, recognizing the look.

Hail's eyes went downcast. "She died carrying my kits, killed by the rogues in the forest near here." He shook himself, like he was washing the memories off his coat. "But that was a long time ago. I

still live at our old den, in the same forest as the rogues but outside their border. They don't bother me--either they don't know I'm there, or they don't care. After all, if they kill every cat, there won't be any more in the future."

Ravenpaw saw sense in his words, but his heart still hurt with empathy. To lose his mate to MothClan would be horrible--Rain had told him enough he knew that the cats, even if they knew she was expecting, would have no mercy on her. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said sincerely.

Hail gave a nod of gratitude. "Thank you, Ravenpaw. But as I said, it was a long time ago. One day I will see Bell again in the afterlife, but for now, I have Newt to care for--and you, as well, until we get you back to your family."

Ravenpaw was grateful for the elderly tom's words. To know he wasn't to be alone made him feel better. He was going to ask more about Newt, but his stomach rumbling interrupted him before he even began.

Ravenpaw sniffed the air, hoping for food, and his nose led him to the front of his cage. There were two silvery hollow rocks, one filled with water and the other what he first thought were rabbit droppings, then he realized they smelled weakly of dried prey. "Is this... food?" he asked hesitantly.

"My main complaint about Tallwalkers," Hail sighed, pausing his mission to clean his chest. "They truly don't understand what we like to eat. On occasion, my Twolegs would give me fish with my pellets, made it much better. Just choke 'em down and drink plenty of water, they're very dry. And, by the way, the water doesn't taste all that good, either. But it's better than nothing."

Ravenpaw wasn't too reassured by this, but his hunger overpowered him and, after sniffing the "pellets", he nibbled a few. Like Hail said, they were dry and quite tasteless, hard on the way down his throat. He followed the first couple of pellets with water, but it had a harsh tang that somehow was almost dry.

He didn't have the strength to eat his fill, so after a few mouthfuls

he washed his mouth out with water, hating how dry his throat felt afterward and went back to his nest missing the taste of mouse more than ever before. "What else is there to do here?" he asked after he had settled back in the thin nest, curling his tail around his paws.

"Not much," Hail sighed, scratching behind his ear with a hind leg. "All you really can do is share stories or sleep. Boredom kills more cats than the Last Door does." His eyes gleamed briefly with amusement.

Ravenpaw didn't find that too entertaining either, but he decided most of it was his bad mood and kept quiet. He liked Hail, despite his questionable humor, and didn't want to ruin the helpfulness of the elder. "I don't really feel like sleeping yet," he admitted, his nightmare still in his mind.

"Then why don't we talk?" Hail suggested. "Tell me about why you came here--to the area, I mean, not the Trap-den."

"We were looking for a missing Clanmate," Ravenpaw explained. "Our leader, actually. She went a little, well, crazy, and ran off. Silverstrike, my father's brother, led us here. My older brothers and my littermate were in the patrol, too. We found her and convinced her to return with us, but we were attacked by dogs and Silverstrike... He died protecting all of us."

"He sounds like a good cat," Hail said softly. "I'm sorry you lost him."

"Me, too. I hope he finds StarClan, even this far away..." He went quiet, looking at his dark paws for a few moments.

"You mentioned StarClan before--they're your warrior ancestors, right?" Hail's tone was light and curious.

"Yeah. They guide us sometimes, in times of trouble. They're more quiet than I would like, though," he added.

Hail nodded. "Well, if they intervened with everything, wouldn't you get weak? You'd expect them to solve all your problems."

Ravenpaw forced himself to nod in agreement, seeing sense but not enjoying the thought.

He talked for longer than he meant to, just enjoying the feeling of talking about his Clan. He spoke of his family, of Mossrain. He told Hail about his distaste of hunting and fighting, and how his sister had turned on him for it. He talked about Jaypaw for a while, along with Shadefur and Stonecoat--he didn't know what his brothers were doing, and it scared him. Were they searching for him, or had they given up and returned home? *How could they ever explain to EchoClan,* he wondered briefly between sentences, *that Silverstrike is dead and I'm... gone?*

"Do you think they'll come for me?" Ravenpaw finally asked Hail. "My family? Do you think they'd leave me?"

Hail was quiet for a few moments. "Well, you know them better than I do, so it's hard for me to answer that. I'm sure they love you, and would want to rescue you, but they might not even know where you are. How long could they search with no idea where to go?"

The words hurt, but Ravenpaw was thankful for his truth.

"I want them to wait for me," he admitted softly. "But I know they might not be able to..."

Hail's eyes glowed with sympathy. "How far is your home? Could you get there by yourself?"

Ravenpaw softly shook his head. "I wouldn't be able to feed myself, or defend myself... If they leave, I'll be stuck here. I'd probably have to become a kittypet to survive." The thought made him shiver, but he was helpless by himself--a kit was of more use than he was.

"Stop being so dramatic," Hail chided. "I told you already I'd watch out for you, no matter how long it takes. If your family does leave, maybe they'll be able to come back in the future. Stop assuming things that we don't know the outcome of. For now, rest and gather your strength."

Ravenpaw gave a small nod, but found himself unable to speak. *Please, StarClan*, Ravenpaw prayed, *let my family stay just long enough for me to get free. Don't let them leave me...*

I'm sorry that I'm writing shorter chapters, there just isn't much to talk about as the POV needs to change a lot to keep the timeline straight. Hope you guys don't mind, and I hope they aren't too boring. I've found myself trying to fill them up with what I can while the story gets going.

Chapter Seven

Three dawns after meeting Felix, Jaypaw was still not over the shock of losing Ravenpaw, nor the shock of Frostfall expecting kits. Not just kits, but *Silverstrike's* kits. The tom with a mate and kits waiting for him at EchoClan. How could they ever explain to Maskdapple that not only was her mate of several seasons dead, but also going to be a father to another warrior's kits?

Jaypaw didn't envy the cat who would break the news.

Jaypaw licked his muzzle clean of water that he had taken from the stream. It was warmer than he was used to, but it was still fresh and comforting in the cold air. He looked over to where Frostfall was crouched under a thick bracken bush, weighed down with snow. His guilt for her loss pressed down him like he, too, was covered with the white powder, getting heavier and heavier every moment he watched her.

She hadn't just lost a Clanmate, she had lost the tom that she had loved. She was old to have her first litter, and to have to do it alone... Perhaps Goldenpool could help her--he doubted Maskdapple would have any sympathy.

He didn't know what to say to the she-cat, so he instead kept his distance. He practiced his stalking through the garden, stepping light on the snow and trying to slip under the bushes and against flowers without making noise. So far he wasn't that successful. After a while hunger pulled taunt on his stomach, so he crouched down at the edge of the pond and looked in at the water.

A golden fish swam slowly by and Jaypaw flashed in a paw. It dodged out of the way and disappeared in the rocks on the other side. He heard a crackled laugh echo behind him. Turning, he saw Sawyer walking over, a limp in his step. "You'll have to try harder than that! Those goldies don't like being caught."

"Goldies? I thought they were fish." It was the first thing that came

to Jaypaw's mind, and Sawyer's expression made him extremely self-conscious.

"Goldfish," he clarified. "Not like those fish in the wild you probably try to catch. These guys aren't too good to eat. You should stick with the food the Tallwalker gives--it'll grow on you."

The Twoleg who owned the flower shop--which is what Felix said the den was called--set out bowls of mushy wet food. It wasn't too bad, tasting faintly of fish and something he didn't recognize. It definitely wasn't bad, but he preferred fresh prey more. His stomach decided it didn't care that much, so he left Sawyer with a nod and went to the back of the Twoleg den. He was still uncomfortable getting this close, but it was easier after a few days.

He ate carefully, nosing through the mush to find the chunks that tasted strongly of fish. His fur prickled, and he looked up at the clear opening in the back of the den to see a Twoleg staring down at him. It was Felix's owner, an older male. He had an arch in his back and walked with a stick in his paw that went down to the ground--how he held it was a wonder to Jaypaw.

He ate slower now, watching the Twoleg to make sure he didn't make a move to come outside. But he just watched, and once Jaypaw was full he hurried back to Sawyer, his spine fur lifted slightly. The old tom had an amused gleam in his eyes. "Ivan doesn't come out for new cats, not for a while, at least," Sawyer chuckled. "He knows how you new ones act."

Jaypaw figured Ivan was the Twoleg's name. "Does he come out to you?" Jaypaw asked, shaking out his coat and settling down.

Sawyer shrugged. "Sometimes. I don't want to be an owned cat, but I don't mind a scratch behind the ear once and a while."

"But aren't you owned, staying here all the time?" Jaypaw tilted his head.

Sawyer snorted. "I'm old, I'll admit that much. I can't hunt for myself no more, so I eat and sleep here, but I don't go in, not like Felix."

Jaypaw nodded in understanding. Jaypaw and his Clanmates had made a makeshift den in the corner of the garden, while Sawyer slept in a nest under his ferns next to the water. Felix claimed he had made a bed in a bunch of flowers that grew inside. Once and a while he went home with his Twoleg, but he had been staying here more often since Sawyer moved in.

Silence grew, and Jaypaw looked over to the fence where he and his Clanmates had first entered the garden.

"They'll be back soon, I bet," Sawyer sighed, stretching out his muscles and settling over the snow without much care. He rested his head down, eyes fluttering tiredly.

Jaypaw nodded. For the past few days Rain, Stonecoat, and Shadefur would leave at dawn with Felix to search for the Trap-den or a sign of Ravenpaw, leaving, Frostfall and Jaypaw behind to move faster and through more dangerous areas. They returned at sundown each day, every time with no luck despite scouring each direction as far as they could manage. Now, as the sun settled down in the distance on the third day, Jaypaw's hope was beginning to fade.

Ravenpaw, are you okay? The irrational part of his brain, the part missing his brother so much that it hurt, hoped that somehow, someway, the thought would reach his poor littermate. For a few moments he sat there, looking up at the sky. Night was slowly gathering in the distance, opposite of the sun. He wished he could've seen the stars, but he knew from the previous nights that they weren't as bright here, nor were there as many. As if StarClan themselves were faint where they were. Was it because of the Twolegs, or because of MothClan?

Either way, they weren't here. And Jaypaw desperately needed them. *Please, if any of my ancestors are listening, if any cat who was once StarClan can hear me... Protect Ravenpaw.*

And of course, thinking of StarClan, he thought of Silverstrike, and he reminded himself Ravenpaw was not the only cat who had been taken away--they were just lucky that, as far as they knew, Ravenpaw had yet to die. Just the thought caught Jaypaw's breath,

but he shook it away. No, he would feel if Ravenpaw was gone, he knew that much. His brother was still out there somewhere.

Silverstrike, can you here me? He didn't even know if the tom had made it to StarClan--would they be able to find him, so far from home? Was his spirit following the patrol, staying close to Frostfall's side? Or had he started home in hope of finding StarClan, perhaps, somehow, in hope of getting help? Maybe his spirit could find his son Mossrain, Ravenpaw's over-talkative mentor, and he could get a patrol to come help?

However unlikely, so many possibilities filled his mind of ways things could go right--quite a few of them involving Ravenpaw just randomly appearing, safe and ready to go home.

The only cat to appear was Felix, slipping out from the Twoleg flower shop. He shook his coat and padded happily over. "Hey! We're back! Sawyer, are you sleeping? It's too early for that! It's only sundown!" The young tom sat heavily in the snow, his plump haunches taking a moment to settle still.

"Is everyone okay?" Jaypaw asked as Felix's string of questioning slowed. "Did you find anything?" Like every time, a flare of hope opened in his stomach, then it was immediately killed.

"Everyone's alright, but we couldn't find the Trap-den. We don't even know what we're looking for."

"A huge Twoleg den," Sawyer grumbled, eyes still closed. "Surrounded by a metal fence."

"Don't worry, Sawyer, Rain knew what to look for," Felix meowed, tail flicking happily. "But we still couldn't find it. We've searched so far in every direction, I don't know what's left. It must be so far."

Rain and the patrol finally appeared over the fence, leaping down and sending up small clouds of snow. Jaypaw went over to greet them, grateful that both his brothers were okay. He touched noses with both of them, and gave a nod to Rain. "You really found nothing?" he asked softly.

Rain shook his head, tail low. "We need to decide what to do next. We've searched so far into the Twolegplace, it would take too long to go any farther away from here. It's... It's time we talked about our choices." His voice was quiet and mournful.

Jaypaw hated the idea, but he knew he couldn't argue. Instead he quietly followed Rain and his brothers over to the pond, where Frostfall was settling with Felix and Sawyer, her fur messy and unclean as usual of the past few days. Her lowered ears suggested the two cats had already informed her of the unsuccessful mission.

The group settled together, taking a few moments of silence to acknowledge their failure. Then Rain let out a soft sigh. "It will take us over half a moon to reach EchoClan from where we are now," the tom murmured. "By then, Frostfall will be what, less than half a moon from having her kits?" He looked at the she-cat for confirmation.

She gave a soft nod. "Roughly so," she murmured.

"Traveling so much with kits is dangerous," Rain murmured, eyes flashing with painful memories. "If we encountered no trouble we could stay a further quarter moon, but if we ran into trouble on our journey home, and we were delayed..."

"Frostfall could have kits away from EchoClan," Stonecoat finished quietly.

Rain nodded.

Jaypaw knew what was coming, so did everyone else. Shadefur looked at his paws, leaning close to Stonecoat to take warmth from his coat.

"We... We have to leave Ravenpaw," Rain murmured.

Jaypaw had already thought the words, he had known exactly what Rain was going to say. But they still cut deep into his heart, stinging him sharper than any claws. He thought the earth might swallow him with how low he sunk to the snow.

A soft tail touched his side, and he looked over at Shadefur.

"I know it's hard," Rain murmured. "I owe Ravenpaw everything--he saved my life, reunited me with my daughter. I will never forget that. But EchoClan needs us to return, not just for Frostfall but for Eagleclaw. She needs to become leader, so EchoClan can become steady. The longer she waits for Acornstar, the harder it will be for her to accept it."

Rain spoke the truth, and it hurt more than a lie would've.

"I swear to all of you," Rain added firmly, staring at Jaypaw and his brothers, "to you three most of all--the moment we return to EchoClan, the moment I am granted clearance, I will leave again to find Ravenpaw, even if I must go by myself."

"What..." Stonecoat's mew was quiet. "What if we can't come back? If something goes wrong and Eagleclaw can't let us go?"

Rain was quiet for a few moments. "I don't know. I can't risk upsetting Eagleclaw, but I can't let Ravenpaw be left alone..." He shook himself, eyes turning firm. "We can't wonder about that right now. I... I think it's time. We leave for EchoClan in the morning."

He stood suddenly, turning and walking away. His stance and walk was steady, but Jaypaw had seen his eyes when he stood. They glistened with sadness and grief--he knew he was betraying Ravenpaw, breaking so many promises...

But what choice did they have?

Chapter Eight

Even though Jaypaw's heart was dark and shattered, he was still relieved to touch the forest floor again. The sound and feel of the Twolegplace had been constricting, while the air in the forest was fresh and wild. Jaypaw hoped that, wherever Ravenpaw was, he felt free like this. *Oh, StarClan, why take him? Why didn't you take me instead? He meant more to the Clan than I ever will.*

Already the sun was lowering in the sky, with the cats having spent the entire day crossing the Twolegplace. Felix had come with them for some of the journey, showing them a safe and quick passage through the unfamiliar territory. The young tom had been sad to see them go. "If I see your friend," he had said, "I'll tell him where you went. Make sure to come back and visit!"

Jaypaw's mind flickered back to the present when a monster rushed past on the Thunderpath, sending up a cascade of slush that touched close to the cats, who shied away. But soon silence sat around them again, the snow muffling their steps, filling their chests with cold air.

"Should..." Jaypaw didn't like the sound of his voice in the quiet. "Should we look for Acornstar?"

Rain slowed to a stop, the rest of the patrol instinctively copying him. Rain flicked his tail. "No," he decided. "She made her choice. But we should go back to the old den, in case... In case Ravenpaw returned. We need to pass over the Thunderpath anyway, to keep away from the rogues' territory."

With nothing else needed to say, Rain stepped over to the Thunderpath. It was quiet, now, the air still. Rain pressed one paw to the black surface, then padded across with no rush. Jaypaw followed him, staying close to Shadefur's side. The forest seemed much more unnerving than it used to, the undergrowth hiding more shadows than he remembered.

Eventually, they found the tree den they had stayed at before losing Ravenpaw, the snow around the clearing untouched by pawprints. They paused at the edge of the undergrowth, and Rain went forward alone. He sniffed the air and nosed his way into the den, but Jaypaw could see his body sink low, tail briefly touching the snow. He pulled his head out and looked at the patrol with a small shake of his head.

"No cat is here," he said quietly. "Ravenpaw has not returned..."

And Acornstar didn't stay. Jaypaw felt another strong flash of rage for the she-cat. She had been so quick to abandon everyone who tried to help her--he promised right there that he would never betray anyone; he would defend EchoClan and his family until his last breath, no matter how hard it was.

"We should start moving now," Rain decided softly. "We still have a while before nightfall, so we might make it away from the rogues' territory."

Shadefur and Stonecoat quietly agreed with low ears. Frostfall was silent, but Jaypaw could see the regret in her eyes--she knew it was her fault they were leaving so soon. No matter how much Jaypaw wanted to hold it against her, to turn his grief into anger, he couldn't manage it. She didn't mean to carry kits, not on such an important journey. It was her fault, but she couldn't be blamed for it.

Rain hesitated for a moment, looking back at the den with one paw raised. Then he gave a small shake of his head and forced himself away. Jaypaw felt a similar pull to the den, but he knew that it was empty. His brother wasn't here. He was lost in the Twolegplace, and at that moment, Jaypaw finally realized that he would never see his littermate again.

His paws dragged through the snow after the patrol. They walked quietly, with no reason to speak. They moved slowly through the woods, their hearts pulling them back--it felt wrong to leave, but there was nothing else they could do. Ravenpaw was trapped and they had no idea how to find him.

Jaypaw barely realized the passing of time, barely noticed his paws moving over the ground. He barely even thought about anything, it was all just blank.

Until Frostfall's nose twitched. "I smell cats... and blood," she murmured, eyes fixating through the forest with as much focus as she could muster.

Rain flicked his tail to order the cats close, his ears perked as he listened. Then he slowly led them forward, stepping carefully over the snow. Fear attempted to touch Jaypaw's heart, but it was a dull feeling.

Eventually, Jaypaw heard the sound of cats talking. Rain slowed even more, slipping quietly into a patch of undergrowth. The cats lined up, pressed against each other, to spy the scene before them.

Crouched upon a pile of boulders was a familiar ginger-brown she-cat with bristling fur and fierce dark amber eyes. Facing Acornstar was the three largest cats Jaypaw had ever seen--in front was a dark gray tom with long, muscular legs and yellow eyes that gleamed with murderous excitement. To one side was a brown tabby tom and the other a surprisingly beautiful tortoiseshell-she-cat, but the dark glow in her amber eyes was like nothing Jaypaw had ever seen.

Jaypaw felt Rain's body ripple with shock and anxiety, but he already knew who these cats were. They were MothClan, and they were out for blood.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," the dark gray tom was taunting, while his two friends began to slip to either side of the rocks, fur bristling and claws flashing. Acornstar was bunched up to look bigger, hissing at the she-cat then at the main tom.

"Back off!" her meow was surprisingly strong and clear, tail lashing through the air.

The tortoiseshell let out a sound between a chuckle and growl, a sound Jaypaw was sure would haunt his nightmares. "Behave," she suggested, "and your death will quick."

"After some fun," the third suggested silkily.

The dark gray tom purred, but to call it a rumbling growl would be more accurate. His teeth gleamed red, and Jaypaw realized that Acornstar was bleeding from her shoulder. "I hope you put up a good fight," his tongue flickered out over his muzzle, his uneven whiskers twitching from the contact. "I like when my prey makes a challenge."

Then he leaped right at EchoClan's old leader.

Jaypaw was completely expecting the giant tom's fangs to sink deep into Acornstar's neck--the last thing he thought would happen would be the she-cat leaping straight up into the air. As the tom soared under her, she fell back down on his spine, claws digging in as she landed with shocking grace. With not even a heartbeat's hesitation, the leader used the tom as a launching point and tackled the tortoiseshell into the snow with a warrior's battle cry.

The brown tabby hissed and started toward the rocks, but Shadefur and Stonecoat, without even a glance at each other, leaped forward together. Rain cried out, but it was too late to stop them. Shadefur landed on the brown tabby's back while Stonecoat ran right past, leaped up the rocks, and slammed into the dark gray tom, sending them both toppling over the side.

Frostfall tried to rush forward, but this time Rain was there, grabbing her shoulder with his teeth and dragging her back. "Don't! You'll risk your kits!" his mew was harsh and dry. Jaypaw felt the tom shaking, and realized that for the first time Jaypaw had ever seen, Rain was scared. The large tom moved one paw forward like he wanted to help, but something held him back. His eyes were wide with fear.

Jaypaw took in the battle, knowing that he would be useless against these warriors--he would just be a distraction to his brothers, and a toy for the MothClan cats. Shadefur had initially shocked the brown tabby, but he had been quick to react. He had rolled, forcing Shadefur to jump away, and was currently jumping back to his paws with surprising speed, considering his bulk. Shadefur jumped for the tom, but he ducked under then pushed straight up,

slamming his head into Shadefur's chest. He crashed back down to the snow with a grunt and a thud.

Stonecoat, meanwhile, had lost the tumble down the rocks to the bigger, older warrior. He had the young tom pinned, eyes shining. "Trying to perform a rescue?" he mocked. "How adorable!" His claws dug into Stonecoat's chest. "Any last words?"

Jaypaw knew he couldn't let his brother die, even if it meant risking his own life. He was bunching his muscles to leap when Rain stormed out of the undergrowth. He flashed over the snow with the speed of lightning, barreling over the dark gray tom with a yowl. "Help Shadefur!" he called as he and gray tom rolled over each other.

Scrambling to his paws, Stonecoat raced for his brother and brown tabby.

And that's when Acornstar came into Jaypaw's view from behind the rocks. She had a new scratch over her eye, bleeding down to obstruct her vision, but it was doing nothing to slow her fighting skill. The tortoiseshell sent blow after striking blow at the runaway leader, but she ducked and dodged each one.

She never sent a swipe back, retreating and diving this way and that. Her breathing was calm and controlled, and Jaypaw realized the tortoiseshell was tiring. Her slashes were getting slower, more desperate. She tried to leap, but Acornstar avoided it with the speed of a snake striking. And in that instance, she went on the attack.

The leader was a flurry of movement. She slashed high, dashed to the side, then sliced the she-cat's neck. Then she threw herself under the she-cat, turning as she landed, and pushed the enemy's stomach with her back paws. The tortoiseshell went flying, and Acornstar was up in a heartbeat with the smooth movements of a soft stream. She launched at the tortoiseshell, and they became a screeching ball of twirling fur.

"You!"

Jaypaw looked to where Rain and the gray tom were fighting. They

had broken apart from their tussle, and now they faced each other. The dark gray tom's eyes were wide with shock.

"I thought you would be dead by now, Rainshadow!" The tom's voice was full of disbelief. Jaypaw felt Frostfall stiffen beside him, and he realized the secret was out.

"Don't you remember my promise, Sleekleg?" Rain taunted breathlessly, all fear gone from his body. He stood ready and powerful, solid as stone. For a moment, Jaypaw could see how similar they looked in body shape. "I told you I'd kill you."

Sleekleg gave a growl, eyes flashing with a twisted excitement. "Brave words for a coward--I wonder if you can back them up?"

A deep rumble grew in Rain's throat. "I've been waiting for this fight many seasons over," Rain informed the MothClan warrior.

"Oh, you aren't still jealous, are you?" Sleekleg tilted his head, his voice light and mocking. "Honestly, it's not *my* fault I was chosen to mate with Violetfrost. Though, when Ryefang told me that you were smitten with the little thing, I thought it would be quite a great way to teach you a lesson. After all, to know the cat you love birthed the kits of your father... Well, it must do badly for the soul."

Rain launched from the snow and barreled the tom over. They slammed into some undergrowth, a snarling mess of fur and claws. Jaypaw stared after them in shock. No wonder they looked so similar! Poor Rain... Jaypaw could never understand the hate Sleekleg felt--Rain was his kit, he should want to protect him, not betray and hurt him.

A horrible yowl of agony cut through the air, over the snarling. Acornstar had pinned the tortoiseshell and had her teeth deep in the she-cat's shoulder, jerking her head back and forth, throwing the she-cat around as she cried and screeched.

"Patchroar!" The brown tabby, sending skillful slashes at both Stonecoat and Shadefur, took the toms' moment distraction to slam his head in Shadefur's chest, sending him stumbling back. Then the MothClan warrior leaped past the toms and thudded over the snow.

He grabbed onto Acornstar's back before she could react, tugging his body to the side and sending the she-cat toppling onto him. He somehow held on, crushed but determined with his teeth in her neck.

Patchroar, the tortoiseshell, struggled to her paws and leaped for Acornstar, teeth digging into her throat and back paws scratching furiously at her lower stomach. Blood spluttered free, coating the bright ground in a horrible splatter. Stonecoat had been right on the tom's tail, and grabbed the tortoiseshell by her neck and began struggling to pull her off, but she held her teeth firm in Acornstar's throat. The she-cat gurgled and fought desperately, but her movements were slowing.

Shadefur had recovered and reached the cats next, grabbing the tortoiseshell by her injured shoulder and tugging as hard as she could. Stonecoat threw himself backward in a desperate attempt, and with a loud *snap,* Patchroar broke free from Acornstar, falling back and landing limp on Stonecoat. The tom struggled for freedom while Shadefur dug his claws into the brown fur of the tom under Acornstar, dragging him away. His teeth were in Acornstar's neck still, but Shadefur, with no mercy and no warrior etiquette, bit down on the tom's face.

When the brown tom opened his jaws in a horrible screech, Shadefur let go but instantly dug his fangs deep in the enemy tom's upper neck, dragging him away across the snow, farther from where Acornstar lay, twitching and coughing up blood.

The violence of the fight sent shivers down Jaypaw's spine. Warriors didn't fight like this, not to the death and not with such horrible moves--MothClan was ruthless, and they were willing to die just to inflict a single extra wound. Stonecoat and Shadefur were fighting with necessary force, but it was still terrifying.

Rain stumbled away from the undergrowth, shaking his coat while trying to catch his breath. His fur was messy and stained with blood. A red trail followed him through the snow back to the bush he had crushed, where Sleekleg lay dead, blood rushing from his throat to soak into the snow.

Shadefur threw the brown tabby away, the tom crying out in pain and anger. His injured eye was shut tight, bleeding profusely down his face. "Cowards!" he yowled, scrambling through the snow.

Rain stepped over the tom, placing one paw down on his spine to stop him from moving. "Larchblaze," Rain's meow was harsh with recognition.

The tom slowed his movements. "It is you..." Larchblaze murmured, turning his one good eye on Rain. Then it went past him, back to where Stonecoat was shrugging off Patchroar's body with the help of his brother. The tortoiseshell lay broken and limp in the snow, her head bent at a horrible angle. "Patchroar..."

Rain's head tilted slightly, then he let out a soft scoff. "Well, it seems no matter how hard Mothstar tries, she *still* can't stop cats from falling in love."

Larchblaze gave a soft growl, but the blood leaking into his muzzle made him cough. "I'll kill you," the tom whispered weakly. "We'll hunt you down, and I'll watch your blood soak the soil..."

Rain blinked. There was a gleam of sadness in his eyes, but it was overrun with determination. "I won't let MothClan hurt my home or my family. Not again. I'm sorry, Larchblaze." Without another word, Rain sliced his claws over the tom's throat. His brown eyes glowed briefly with anger, then it faded.

Rain turned slowly to face Stonecoat and Shadefur as Jaypaw and Frostfall crawled from the undergrowth. The white she-cat was stiff against the apprentice's side.

"You were one of them," Shadefur said softly, eyes full of disbelief. "You... You were born with the rogues?"

"Yes." Rain's gaze was dull.

Stonecoat stared at Rain, eyes wide as the full moon. "You..." he breathed, then his shock turned to anger, and his claws, still stained red, slid out and touched the snow. His muscles stiffened, and his eyes hardened. "We let you sleep in our camp! In our nursery!

You're a murderer!"

"I had no choice," Rain murmured. "If you don't follow the rules you die."

"You killed that tom after he was beaten!" Shadefur's tail lashed angrily in Larchblaze's direction. "You killed the other, one, too! Warriors don't kill unless we don't have a choice!"

Stonecoat's eyes flickered briefly to Patchroar, then he gave a rough nod to agree with his brother. He hadn't meant to kill Patchroar, but Rain had killed both the toms on purpose.

Yet he stood tall, and without shame. "If I hadn't, they would've warned MothClan, and they would follow us to our deaths."

Shock rippled through not only Shadefur and Stonecoat but Frostfall as well.

"Moth*Clan*?" Frostfall clarified, ears flat and blue eyes as wide as the sky.

"Yes." Rain nodded softly. "But they are everything that your Clans are not. They are vile and merciless, ready to kill and torture for fun. I fled with my mate, Violetfrost, but I knew I would never be free of them. I'm sure we still aren't..."

"You liar!" Shadefur hissed. "You lied to the Clan, to Ravenpaw! He trusted you!"

"No!" Jaypaw squeaked, unable to hold back. "Ravenpaw knew, from the beginning! Eagleclaw knows too, Rain told her the first night he was in the Clan." He felt wave after wave of gratitude that Ravenpaw had told him about the night-time nursery visit. Then he remembered that his brother was gone, and he had to fight through the darkness that surrounded his vision. "Eagleclaw decided to trust Rain, that's why he came on the journey, to protect us from MothClan. Eagleclaw kept it a secret so cats didn't get scared."

Shadefur swallowed, looking from Jaypaw to Rain. "You... you trust him?" Shadefur asked his young brother.

Jaypaw nodded instantly. "Ravenpaw did too, with his life. Rain was born in MothClan, but... he's EchoClan now. And he always will be."

His brothers were quiet, their gazes still hesitant.

Then Frostfall caught sight of something behind the toms, and cried out. "Acornstar!" she gasped.

Jaypaw had completely forgotten. So had everyone else. They raced over to the she-cat, who lay stretched out in the snow. Her body jerked as blood trickled out of her throat. Her eyes were misted with pain.

"How many lives does she have left?" Shadefur asked. "Does anyone know?"

"No..." Acornstar's voice was faint. "I... I don't... want to come... back..." she breathed out the words quietly, softly. "Won't... allow... it..." She blinked once, slow and pained. "Eagleclaw... needs... to lead... so... proud..." Her eyelids fluttered, and she briefly fixated on something no other cat could see. "Redcloud... Larkpaw... Save me..."

Her eyes dulled, and finally, Acornstar was granted the peace she had always wished for.

No cat spoke, no cat moved. They sat in the snow and watched. They waited, and they waited. Jaypaw had never seen a leader die before, but he had been told stories--they died for a few moments, then their fur would ripple and their wounds would seal closed as StarClan healed them, then their eyes would open.

But Acornstar did not move.

"She won't come back..." Frostfall finally murmured. "She is with those she loves..."

They stayed quiet for a little longer out of respect, and soon Jaypaw didn't even notice the smell of blood in the air. He didn't like Acornstar, but he couldn't help but feel bad for her. She had been lost in her own head, but in her final moments, she had fought like

a warrior--no, better than a warrior. She had been amazing, and Jaypaw would be lucky to fight half as well as her when he was older.

"We need to get moving," Rain murmured. "MothClan will come looking--"

"No." Shadefur's mew was firm. "I don't know or care what MothClan did with their dead, but Acornstar was an EchoClan cat, and she'll be buried as one. I don't care how hard the ground is, she will be buried with respect and we'll sit vigil for her--not through the whole night, but long enough to honor her." The tom stood with a small grunt, fresh blood oozing from his wounds. "All of you, find a spot and dig. Mossrain taught me a few herbs, enough to get by, at least. I'll see if I can find some." He turned and began to walk off, then paused with one paw in the air. "You saved my life today, Rain, not for the first time. I'll trust you for Ravenpaw--for now."

Then he disappeared into the undergrowth, and Jaypaw was left to stare at Acornstar's body, slowly stiffening as death solidified in her body.

This patrol wasn't worth it... Jaypaw thought sadly. *We've lost too much... I just want to go home.*

I think this is actually the fastest I've written for a while. I've been really into writing the story, and I finished this chapter on the third of May, same day I published Chapter Three. So, I think it's going pretty well, but it also means I don't know the feedback on most of the story yet. Oh well.

Chapter Nine

Blazepaw watched as Hopekit hesitantly stumbled out of her nest, big kit-blue eyes wide with fear. "Come on!" Flintkit was urging softly, his voice squeaky and young. He was only a few days older, but he was big for his age of a moon and a half. When Hopekit's paws finally touched the stone ground of the nursery, Flintkit mewled happily and raised his tail. After a moment, little Hopekit copied him, eyes glowing proudly.

"Can *we* leave the nest?" Breamkit asked her mother, peering up at Ashbreeze with blue eyes that were slowly turning to brown.

"Maybe tomorrow," Ashbreeze told her kit softly, drawing both her and her sister closer. Blazepaw saw the flash of sadness in the kit's eyes, and understood her disappointment--Ashbreeze barely let her kits free from the nest, preferring to keep them close. Even though they were two and a half moons old, they looked small and skinny, so Ashbreeze was extra protective of them.

Maybe they'd be bigger if they got exercise? Blazepaw wondered, but he knew better than to question the older queen--he didn't really feel like having scratched ears.

He felt a pelt move beside him as Primkit shifted closer. "I wish Rowanpaw could see Hopekit," she murmured softly. "He would be so proud!"

"I think so, too," he responded quietly, wrapping his tail around his sister. He knew she missed Rowanpaw horribly, and couldn't help but think that their brother would be proud of Primkit, too. Their small sisters had grown quite a bit recently, growing into fine young cats, getting close to Blazepaw's size, in fact. Almost five moons old, now, they were losing their kit fluff and were even beginning to practice hunting crouches on the days they felt stronger. But Primkit had grown quite a bit mentally, too. She wasn't as wild as she used to be, but still kept strong and was more

playful than most BatClan cats.

He couldn't help but glance at his other two sisters, Fernkit and Meadowkit. Both kits missed their mother, much more than Primkit did, but Fernkit missed Rowanpaw, too; all three had been horrified by the news that Rowanpaw had been exiled for Aspenheart's death, but only Meadowkit refused to forgive the tom--she more refused to comment on the topic, but she looked unsteady and cramped whenever he was mentioned. He was glad she was sleeping at the moment, because she looked peaceful.

He heard a mewl and looked over at Hopekit. She had fallen to her stomach and struggled to regain her paws. Rainsong leaned out of the nest and grabbed the kit's scruff, lifting her up until she stood on her paws, then she let the kit travel again. Flintkit pawed at Hopekit, a soft movement that unsteadied him until he fell on his rump.

Hopekit gave a weak purr, and tried to tackle the tom, which was more just her waddling over and falling into him. Blazepaw gave a soft snort of amusement as he watched them move as if they were in water, slow and unsteady on stumpy legs.

"Blazepaw?" a voice called from outside the nursery.

Primkit gave a mew of disappointment. "Are you gonna leave?" She looked at him with great big eyes so similar to Rowanpaw's he shivered.

He touched his nose to her's, tail flicking softly. "Sorry, Primkit. I'll come back and sleep in here tonight, okay? I'll even tell you a story."

"Okay!" she brightened instantly.

He stood up and stretched, then licked her forehead before slipping free from the nursery. Waiting for him was Hazelfur, who had taken his apprenticeship since Juniperfur was still struggling to gain her strength as she recovered from whitecough. It wasn't easy, having switched three mentors throughout his apprenticeship, but he was determined to do his best. He was training for both himself *and*

Rowanpaw now.

"Ready to go hunting?" Hazelfur asked. "Hickoryclaw, Brackenfoot, and Clovertail are coming with."

The thought of hunting with his deputy terrified Blazepaw--*Oh, StarClan, don't let me make a fool of myself!*

Hiding his fear, he followed Hazelfur across the clearing where the other cats were waiting for them. "Everyone ready?" Clovertail asked, looking over the group. As always, Clovertail stood tall and proud, yellow eyes glowing with a strong readiness. It was easy to see why she was deputy. When every cat nodded, Clovertail flicked her tail. "Come on, then."

She led them up the rocky path and down into the snowy territory, landing smoothly. Blazepaw stumbled slightly as he hit the snow, shaking out his coat as he straightened. Clovertail watched him warmly. "I haven't had an apprentice in many moons," she mentioned, her eyes turning thoughtful. "Hmm... Perhaps I'll take another soon."

Blazepaw brightened at the thought. He would be proud to have one of his littermates apprenticed to the Clan's deputy. "Primkit would be a good choice," he suggested cheekily.

Clovertail purred, a small laugh growing in her throat. "I don't know, she sure is a lot. But I'm sure it'll make her a great warrior either way."

As the last patrol member landed, Clovertail flicked her tail and led them onward. The forest was quiet and muffled by snow, but Blazepaw found he was warm inside despite the icy air. He felt as if the world was brightening--it hurt that Rowanpaw was gone, and he wished his brother was back in the Clan recovering from his horrible past, but it still felt like the Clan was becoming stronger either way. Their new territory was beginning to fuel them--Blazepaw had never felt as strong, and he could see that his Clanmates were filling out slightly, while all the kits in the nursery had more energy.

CrowClan and SageClan had saved their lives, and Blazepaw couldn't help but feel grateful. He knew he owed them his life, and the lives of many of his Clanmates--after all, only rarely did they now hunt in their original territory.

"I want to go to SageClan territory first," Clovertail told the patrol. "Then we'll cross over to the CrowClan border. Keep your ears open and paws silent."

Blazepaw traveled by Hazelfur's side as they went on. "Rabbits will sometimes stray into the forest from SageClan," Hazelfur told the apprentice, echoing words Juniperfur had told him before, but he kept his silence and listened respectfully. "They'll hear and scent you before they feel you, so you need to be quiet and go from downwind. And remember--we're fast, but only for a brief moment."

Blazepaw nodded, remembering when Heronclaw, his first mentor, had told him all about the Clans greatest strengths--EchoClan was big but shockingly soft and fast on their paws; SageClan was lithe and could run long distances without tiring; CrowClan was stocky but had incredibly strong back legs that allowed for huge leaps; and BatClan was small, able dash faster than any other Clan for a short distance, but they tired quickly after.

"So how do you think we would take a rabbit?" Hazelfur continued, looking at him with a surprisingly soft glance. Since being chosen as his temporary mentor, she seemed to have warmed to him more. Blazepaw had noticed she didn't spend that much time with her brother Birchsplash too much--he hated Rowanpaw with everything he had, and it seemed to extend to Blazepaw, too, because he supported his brother. Birchsplash was grieving for loss of Aspenheart, his old mentor and friend, and he had grown cold and little cruel.

His sadness turned to anger... It reminds me of Rowanpaw.

"Uh," was his first response to his mentor, just to show he was thinking about it. "Well, we'd probably surround it, out of its scent range, then have a cat downwind get as close as they can before chasing it--if they don't get it right away, they angle themselves to go to the waiting cats, so they can try to get it, too."

Clovertail overheard him, and purred. "Quite a hunter we have on our paws," she commented warmly.

Blazepaw's ears flattened and he pressed his muzzle to his chest, feeling his fur go hot.

Hazelfur gave a soft purr, nudging his shoulder. "You should be proud, Blazepaw. I've noticed as well--it's hard to be a good hunter in BatClan, growing up weakened by starvation, but you've done quite well. We keep you strong and well-trained, you could be a great hunter one day."

That did nothing to help his embarrassment. Clovertail was *definitely* going to be watching him now, and he was terrified of making a mistake. Suddenly, he found himself stumbling over the snow as he tripped over a hidden root. He was sure that the sun must've taken root under his coat by how badly he was burning with embarrassment.

Hickoryclaw gave a soft purr, blinking kindly as the apprentice hurried after the patrol, shaking off the pain in his paw. Brackenfoot snorted and quickened his pace as if he couldn't wait to get away.

Eventually they reached the Old Thunderpath, scenting nothing but sap and hearing nothing but pine needles rustling until after they passed over. Almost instantly, Blazepaw heard a soft rustle of ferns. Without even thinking, he crouched, curling his tail over his side to keep it away from making unnecessary noise. The patrol stopped and perked their ears, and Hickoryclaw silently flicked his tail to the nearby ferns.

The undergrowth moved again, only barely, and in the darkness, Blazepaw spotted a tiny nose. The wind blew against his left side, so he only took a single step forward before gathering his paws tight to his body and launching forward in a flash. The mouse squealed, but Blazepaw slapped his paw down on its tail, the ferns dropping heavy snow on his back. He slammed his other paw down on the mouse's back, hearing its thin bones snap.

"Well done!" Clovertail praised.

Blazepaw stared down at the mouse in shock, then looked over at his Clanmates. His anxiety quickly returned. "I was just lucky," he said hesitantly, hoping he wasn't setting them to be excited for the rest of the hunt, only for him to crash on everything else.

"Well, let's see if that luck lasts," Hazelfur purred, "and extends to the rest of us."

She helped Blazepaw bury the mouse under the fern bush they had caught it at, packing snow tightly over it to keep it warm. "Don't forget that we need to return for it," she reminded him.

"I won't," he promised, his stomach already growling, not too happy with his decision to leave the mouse untouched.

"Come on, then." Clovertail's eyes were glowing with amusement, and she led the patrol onward.

They didn't end up finding any rabbits, but Hickoryclaw and Brackenfoot worked together up in a tree to catch a sparrow--Blazepaw was just fine keeping his paws on the ground. In CrowClan territory Clovertail barely managed to catch a vole before it slipped into the river, while Blazepaw was busy cursing himself over and over for missing a squirrel that practically ran under his paws.

Hazelfur emerged from the snowy undergrowth, shaking her fur clean. "It's gone," she reported. "But don't worry about it--every cat misses prey."

Blazepaw muttered incoherently in response, still feeling shamed he had missed the easy catch--the smell had been intoxicating.

"Don't beat yourself up," Clovertail told him, dropping her water-slick vole down on the snow. "This hunt has been massively successful--big patrols seem to work much better."

Blazepaw gave a small nod. They had missed a few catches--Hazelfur had broken the snow under her paws with a mouse, and Brackenfoot hadn't gotten close enough to a thrush before leaping. He was nearby now, still trying to pick part of the bird's feather

from his claws.

"We'll wait for Hickoryclaw to come back before heading back for the previous catches," Clovertail informed the cats, deciding the talk of prey was over.

As if her words had summoned the black tom, he soon appeared, shaking snow from his coat as he brushed against the thin undergrowth. Blazepaw perked his ears in interest as he noticed the tom's gaze--like he had seen something.

"There's fox scent not far from the Old Thunderpath," he reported to Clovertail, his voice smooth and undeterred. Blazepaw shivered at the idea of a fox, and was awed that the warrior seemed so calm. Unable to help himself, Blazepaw flashed back to when he was a kit, when he and Rowanpaw had been attacked by a fox to be saved by Emberheart. They had been visiting the log where Sparkkit, their kithood friend, had died after injuring herself falling from a tree. Blazepaw had seen and scented foxes since then, but hadn't gotten close.

But now he could see the light of thought twisting in Clovertail's eyes, and he knew what the deputy would say.

"We'll go check it out--this territory is new to us, and we won't stand for any trespassers." Blazepaw could see how her muscles flexed under her pelt. With the Clan regaining their energy Blazepaw could see why the deputy was determined to protect their new land--they never really had the strength to protect themselves before, to have it now... Even he wasn't against trying to chase off the fox. Maybe, with so many warriors, it would turn tail.

Even with that thought, he couldn't help but shiver as he followed the patrol through the forest, Hickoryclaw in the lead as he tracked his path back to where he scented the fox. As they neared the Old Thunderpath, Blazepaw could swear the forest began to get quieter. The birdsong that had touched the tops of the trees died, and soon all Blazepaw could hear was the wind rustling the sparse undergrowth of the forest. He missed the marsh, the undergrowth was thicker there--CrowClan's old forest had patches of thin undergrowth all around, but none of it seemed heavy enough to

hide a cat effectively.

Soon they found the scent marks against a tree. Blazepaw recognized it as a female fox, or a vixen as Heronclaw said it was called, and he wondered if it had kits--*do foxes keep their litters through leaf-bare?* He had no idea, and he wasn't keen on finding out.

"Its path leads back to where it first came from," Brackenfoot reported, having followed the trail along the snow--the paw prints were large and flat, backtracking on themselves after circling around the tree a few times.

"Towards the Old Twolegplace?" Clovertail's ear flicked thoughtfully, and she looked over at Hickoryclaw. "You had foxes near where you used to live, right?"

Hickoryclaw nodded. "It was far away, but..." his eyes went thoughtful. "The cats in our garden had a sort of deal with the foxes--we left out prey, and they didn't attack."

Brackenfoot snorted disrespectfully. "How weak! You couldn't fight for yourself?"

Hickoryclaw's eyes narrowed on the tom. "It wasn't my decision. Besides, we didn't know where the foxes came from, and when we didn't feed them, they always attacked hard and fast before we could protect ourselves. At the time it was the only option--most of us didn't have warrior training," he added.

"Continue your original thought, Hickoryclaw," Clovertail suggested, eying Brackenfoot as if daring the tom to interrupt again. He snorted again but said nothing.

"Well, we fought them before we left, then their prey stopped, too. They might've gotten angry, and maybe they, well, went hunting for us."

Clovertail's tail flicked uneasily, and Blazepaw wished he could run right back to camp. "There's only one so far," she ventured. "So maybe only one came to the forest."

"Optimism?" Brackenfoot growled. "Really? When has BatClan ever been about optimism?"

Clovertail flicked her tail dismissively. "Either way, I want to follow her, make sure she's leaving. If not, we can give her a few scars to remind her we aren't prey."

There was the familiar prickling of Blazepaw's fur, creating a harshness in his chest. He tried to forced it down, wanting to look brave in front of his Clanmates. His paws hesitated to follow, and he felt Hazelfur brush against his side. "You've had plenty of battle practice," she reminded him. "Just remember the moves you've been taught. But if you don't want to fight, you don't have to."

Blazepaw nodded, but couldn't quite get his voice to work yet.

The forest seemed much larger, now, the trees extra tall and threatening to turn inward. He imagined one falling, the impact with the ground... He tried to stop his shiver, but it didn't work all that well.

The fox's trail led them to the Old Thunderpath, not far from where it passed into the Twolegplace. The fox's scent was fresher now, but still leading into the lines of burned rubble now covered by snow. "Should we follow inside?" Hazelfur asked.

"Why? It's left the territory." Brackenfoot shook out his coat. "A useless fight."

Clovertail flicked her tail in uncertainty, while Blazepaw was ready to run all the way back to camp. Something felt... wrong. He had an indescribable fear in his chest, and he pressed against Hazelfur. "Something's wrong," he whispered hoarsely, as Clovertail ordered them all to follow her along the fox's trail.

Hazelfur ran her tail over his back. "Focus on breathing smoothly. Not knowing what's going to happen creates more fear than a battle does--your mind has nothing to focus on but the bad, so think of the worst possibility, the best possibility, and then the most probable possibility."

Blazepaw swallowed. *Worst, a bunch of foxes attack and we all die. Best, the fox is long gone and we go home without a battle. Most probable... we find the fox and scare it off.*

He focused on the last thought as much as he could. There were four fully trained warriors here--one of them the deputy, no less--and as far as they knew, only one fox.

As far as we know. Anxiety rippled over his coat again, and his chest became tight as his stomach churned.

They had barely entered the Old Twolegplace when a growl sliced through the air.

Standing hidden by the fences were five foxes, three on one side and two on the other. Their lips drew back and their fur was fluffed, and Blazepaw saw the malice clear in their eyes for just a brief moment before they all attacked.

Every hint of anxiety melted away, and time slowed. Hazelfur said something to him, voice harsh and quick, but the words were blurred to his ears--they were something about being careful and trusting himself, or at least close to that. He heard claws hit fur as his Clanmates met their attackers, and Blazepaw was faced with the fox they had been tracking.

It was quite a young female, barely bigger than Blazepaw was. That didn't lessen the dark look in her gaze, though.

Blazepaw raised his fur, hissing and sliding out his claws. He watched her closely as she circled closer. Every trace of his fear was gone, and he was the one to attack first. The vixen seemed surprised, stepping back to avoid his claws before quickly going on attack. She snapped at his neck and he felt the teeth on his fur as he jumped back.

He managed to claw her nose but she launched forward, jaws clamping around his leg. He screeched, but quickly let the pain fuel him, taking it and letting it make him stronger. With the fox's jaws occupied, Blazepaw was free to leap forward and dug his teeth deep in the side of her throat. She let go as she screamed a high-pitched

squeal, but he just dug deeper, latching his claws onto her shoulders and dragging them through her fur, intent on causing all the pain he could.

The fox's teeth sunk into his shoulder, tugging desperately, but he barely felt the pain--it was just hot, and the steady beating in his ears took all his focus. He started to choke on the fox's blood, but refused to adjust his grip in fear of letting go. He felt the fox's grip weakening. Then the vixen began to throw herself around, howling and whimpering. Finally Blazepaw fell free, and he watched, breathing heavy, as it stumbled away.

By now only Hazelfur had finished her fight, and she had joined Brackenfoot, who was fighting the largest fox. Pain began to throb in Blazepaw's shoulder and leg, so he fueled himself with rage and raced forward to Clovertail. Time was still moving slow--Clovertail had been knocked away, and the fox was bracing itself for a leap. It left the snow slow, throwing up a flurry of white. It's teeth was aimed right for Clovertail's throat...

Blazepaw slammed into the side of the fox. It was almost twice as big as him with dark ginger fur, the strong scent of male. Blazepaw already knew he couldn't fight this fox, but he wasn't going to stand by cleaning his claws, either.

And yet he still overestimated himself.

While they were still in the air, the fox turned to grab at him, and it would've latched onto his injured shoulder if Clovertail didn't appear, attacking the fox's face and slashing at its eyes. It instantly turned back to her, and Blazepaw took the chance to climb onto the fox's back like a squirrel going up a tree. He latched on tight, snapping his jaws forward to grab it's scruff and pull back.

The grab stopped the fox from snapping at Clovertail's muzzle, and made it too hard for the fox to get back to Blazepaw. Instead, it threw itself around, jumping and bucking. Blazepaw's body was thrown this way and that, but this time he was determined to hold on. He pressed his belly to the fox's spine, claws deep under the creature's skin.

The fox threw its head upward, and Clovertail took her chance to dig her claws into its fur right under its muzzle, then dragged downwards, blood sputtering from the long cuts, soaking the fox's fur. It barked and yelped and began to stumble away. Blazepaw was still hanging on, enjoying the feeling of the fox's blood, knowing he was protecting his Clan from danger. He wanted to be sure this fox was *never* going to return.

"Blazepaw! Let go!"

He answered immediately to Clovertail's commanding tone. He let his claws sheathe and leaped free. The moment his front paws touched the ground, pain flooded his entire body, and he stumbled and collapsed, gasping in surprise. Harsh pain snaked up his legs, and he struggled to control his breathing.

"Are you okay?" Hazelfur leaned over him, eyes wide with worry.

"I'm fine," he breathed, clamping his jaws tight as he forced himself up. Hazelfur offered her shoulder for him to lean against, but he ignored it, managing to get to his paws alone. He stood with his legs spread to help him retain balance--for a moment his head spun, but he forced it to steady.

"Good fight, Blazepaw," Hickoryclaw congratulated. The tom looked pretty much uninjured, except that he was now missing almost an entire ear, blood leaking down the side of his face, but he didn't seem to mind much; Brackenfoot was holding one bloody leg off the ground, and he had a bite on his spine; Clovertail was bleeding from her neck and tail; Hazelfur's coat was messy and stained with blood, but Blazepaw could see it wasn't her's--the young warrior stood uninjured.

"If you stopped getting bit, you could be an alright warrior," Brackenfoot muttered, which was as close to a compliment he could get.

Clovertail ran her tail along the apprentice's spine. "Thank you for the assistance, Blazepaw." Her eyes clouded for a brief moment. "Your bravery reminds me of a cat I used to know."

Blazepaw, uncomfortable with the praise, looked back at the trail of blood the foxes left in their flight. "Do you think they'll come back?" A small thrill of adrenaline touched his chest, fighting through his pain--that had been his first battle, and it had been much better than he expected. Fighting those foxes... he had never felt more alive.

This was what it was like, being a warrior. He had protected his Clan, and he absolutely loved it.

Chapter Ten

Willowpaw pulled herself into the clearing with her tail high and a large blackbird stuffed in her jaws, shockingly plump for leaf-bare. Pebblepeak came up beside her, a mouse limp in his teeth. He led her to the fresh-kill pile, where she happily set her blackbird right at the top of the vole and chipmunk already there. Her mentor added his catch, tail flicking. "That bird will feed a few bellies tonight," Pebblepeak informed her.

Willowpaw shook out her coat proudly. It was a while past sunhigh so the Clan had already eaten, and wouldn't again until orange dominated the sky. Willowpaw thought that was unfortunate--the blackbird would taste much better fresh. She heard cats approaching, and turned to see her parents and their shared apprentices Pine, Lark, and Rock coming over. Pebblepeak and Willowpaw moved out of the way so Rock could trot forward and drop a squirrel down.

"One of the best catches I've seen from a cat so young!" Snowfern told Pebblepeak proudly. "Squirrel fled up a tree and he took a *huge* leap, landing right on the trunk with it in his teeth!"

Pebblepeak nodded congratulations to the young apprentice, while Boulderclaw flicked his ear to the blackbird. "That yours?" he asked Pebblepeak.

The young warrior raised his head, chest puffing out. "Willowpaw's, actually. She's turning into a fine hunter--scented it before I did, and caught it midflight when I accidentally scared it away."

Boulderclaw purred. "Good job," he told her softly, eyes glowing. Willowpaw shivered happily, her chest filling with pride at the praise. Unable to help herself, she looked to her mother, who *must've* heard the conversation. Would she congratulate her daughter as well?

But the she-cat's head was turning to Lark and Pine. "I have a

border patrol, would you two like to join me? I have a story of your mother I could tell while we go." Her eyes glowed with love as she gazed at the two she-cats.

Boulderclaw's eyes flashed with anxiety, and Willowpaw understood his fear--when he brought a patrol to search the rabbit burrow the stoat had come out of, the cats had been chased away by a horde of the small creatures. Thorntail was still in the medicine cat's den with an infected leg bite five days later.

"Can I come?" Rock looked at the white and black she-cat hopefully.

"We're working on your tree climbing, remember?" Boulderclaw interjected. "We'll be able to patrol all together another time." When Rock looked upset, Boulderclaw added, "I don't have stories of your parents, but I have a few from my own apprenticeship, if you're interested."

"Deal!" Rock's tail swung through the air, hitting Willowpaw's whiskers. She stepped back, tail tip twitching in annoyance.

"Come on," Snowfern meowed to Lark and Pine, a soft purr in her throat. "I need to fetch Brightflower then we'll be going." She led the two apprentices off to the warriors' den, while Boulderclaw's tail flicked in thought.

"When are *we* leaving?" Rock questioned, flexing his claws excitedly. "I want to climb the tallest tree in the territory!"

Boulderclaw purred. "Soon, but I need to talk to Eagleclaw first."

"I'll wait by the forest entrance!" Rock shot off, bounding happily over the snowy clearing.

Willowpaw hoped her father would wish her goodbye, but he seemed to have forgotten she was there and hurried off to Eagleclaw's den without so much as a glance. Disappointment settled heavy in her stomach.

Pebblepeak's nose touched her ear. "Go easy on them," he suggested softly. "Snowfern is trying to connect to the sister she lost the only way available to her, and Eagleclaw would be lost without

Boulderclaw's help. Not only that, but the Clan is stretched very thin right now, and the stoats aren't making it easier. Just give them a little time, and it'll get better."

Willowpaw nodded. She knew it was selfish to want her mother to pay more attention to her, especially after all the love she received throughout her earlier moons--Rock, Lark and Pine had lost their mother, and they *needed* someone fill that void. *I have plenty of other cats who care about me*, Willowpaw told herself. *And they don't.* But it still hurt--her parents hadn't told her many stories of their past, not unless she asked them, so seeing them so open with kits who weren't even theirs...

"We're still going out alone tomorrow, right?" Willowpaw asked Pebblepeak, forcing her parents into the back of her mind. She could use time away from the Clan.

The tom flicked his tail, eyes looking uncertain for a moment, but he nodded. "Yes, we will."

Willowpaw couldn't help but be relieved. Tomorrow she and Pebblepeak would go to the Gathering Hollow, where they would part so she could visit Rowanpaw. The unclaimed forest was a nice way to get her mind away from the troubles of the Clan, to rid herself of the reminder that the stoats were in the heart of their territory and that her parents were ignoring her for "more important" duties. Rowanpaw was still unfriendly, but she knew it wouldn't be like that forever.

He'll get better with effort.

"Hey, Willowpaw!"

The apprentice turned at sound of her name, seeing Petaldust trotting happily over. The wound caused by the stoats on his lower throat was almost unnoticeable in his thick dark ginger chest fur, and his green eyes shone. "Mossrain finally gave me the all clear for full patrols! Foxpounce is leading the other border patrol to meet up with Snowfern's, and he's letting me come with."

Willowpaw purred in congratulations. She and the older

tortoiseshell had gotten closer since they had been attacked by stoats, as she had visited him in the medicine cat's den quite often. "Be careful you don't open your wounds!" she warned him playfully.

He snorted, tail flicking to touch her shoulder, but addressed his words to Pebblepeak. "Do you two want to come with? It's just me with Foxpounce and his kits, so I wouldn't mind the company."

"I can't, I told Oakcloud I'd watch over the moorland entrance so he could go out with Blossompaw--he doesn't want to leave the nursery unguarded. Willowpaw is free to go with, though, I wouldn't want her stuck in camp."

Willowpaw flicked her tail happily. If she could prove herself on the patrol, maybe Foxpounce would tell Snowfern that she did well when the patrols met.

Petaldust sighed dramatically. "Well, if I *have* to." He shot Willowpaw a playful glance. "Just make sure not to cause trouble!"

"I'm sure it will be the other way around," Pebblepeak snorted. He flicked his younger brother with his tail in a parting goodbye then headed for the nursery.

Willowpaw turned and followed Petaldust to the forest entrance, where Foxpounce sat with Firepaw, Flamepaw, and Featherpaw around him. It had almost been a moon and a half since he lost his mate, Russetdawn, after her wounds from a dog fight wouldn't heal. His eyes still had a dull gleam and both Featherpaw and Firepaw were quieter than they had used to be, while Flamepaw was just being Flamepaw--but they were all getting better, recovering from the shock.

"Ready to go?" Foxpounce asked, climbing slowly to his paws. Petaldust nodded, and the ginger tabby warrior led the younger cats to the rocky pathway and down the sloping steps. As she headed down, Willowpaw gazed out to the forest, wondering how long it would be until her brothers stepped back into the territory. Would it be another moon, or would they return tomorrow? The uncertainty made her heart clench.

They traveled through the forest with no luck on prey, and the border with the Old Thunderpath was clear of intruder pawsteps--the only marks in the snow were that of the dawn patrol. Willowpaw cast her gaze to the unclaimed territory, watching the wind rattle the bare branches of the distant trees. Would Rowanpaw be okay until tomorrow, when she could finally visit him?

"They'll be back soon," Petaldust told her. She looked at him for a moment, confused, before suddenly realizing he was speaking of the patrol.

"Oh, right." She looked briefly at her paws, then back down the Old Thunderpath. Would her brothers run into Rowanpaw on their way back into the territory? Hopefully, the brash tom wouldn't cause them trouble if they did--when he wasn't too tired to argue, he could be quite harsh.

"Come on," Petaldust urged, heading after Foxpounce, who hadn't paused to wait for them. Willowpaw took one uncertain step back, hesitating for a moment. Then she gave a small shake of her head and headed after the tom.

They silently followed the border until they reached the end of the trees, where they turned and traveled along the edge. Willowpaw looked out across the snowy slopes of SageClan's home, but most of the land was hidden from her view because of the hills. Eventually, they found the river that edged the majority of their territory before twisting away into the forest.

Foxpounce broke some of the ice from the edge of the river, and they all took turns solving their thirst. The water was icy and hurt going down Willowpaw's throat, settling hard in her belly. She shivered, wishing for the warmth of her nest--but was it really that warm, when she curled up alone in the dry moss and shriveled ferns?

After they all drank their fill, the patrol continued on, marking along the river as they went, until they reached their moorland. A tall hill blocked their way--the river curved around its steep-edged side--and they climbed together. Featherpaw momentarily slipped on the snow, and Firepaw brushed against her side to help her

continue up.

The wind swirled cold around them as they reached the top, and Willowpaw took a deep breath of air, shivering at the freezing touch but enjoying the wild freshness. In the distance, heading toward them along the river, was Snowfern's patrol.

"We've made good time," Foxpounce muttered, tail waving softly. "Come on, we'll meet with them soon and head home."

Willowpaw made a careful way down the slope, trying to keep herself from sliding too often. She watched her paws attentively, like the rest of the patrol, to help herself from falling. She cast a quick gaze up, looking out over the territory for a reason that wasn't clear even to her.

She noticed the distant shape of a rabbit on a lower slope, not too many rises from Snowfern's patrol. From a small patch of heather that obviously hid a burrow, more appeared. But, wait, they were too small, too skinny. And since when did rabbits have long tails?

More and more spilled from the heather, a horde of mingling creatures. *Great StarClan!* "Stoats!" Willowpaw cried, scrambling to a stop. The patrol around her froze, following her gaze with fear scent rising from their pelts.

The small monsters twisted and turned like a sea of fur. A few broke off, heading up a hill. They were too far for Willowpaw to hear them, but they must've communicated something because the entire group rushed up the slope. They didn't stop, bounding down the other side and picking up speed.

"They're going for Snowfern!" Petaldust cried.

He was right--the wave was charging right for the small patrol, and they hadn't noticed yet.

Without a second thought, Willowpaw threw herself down the hill, bounding over the snow and barely touching the ground. She could hear Petaldust running next to her, Foxpounce's whiskers briefly touching her tail. More pawsteps were from Featherpaw, Firepaw,

and Flamepaw.

"Firepaw, go get help!" Foxpounce called to his son, and without hesitation the apprentice veered away, a blur of red over the snow, throwing up slush behind him.

Willowpaw's eyes were locked on her mother's black and white coat. The stoats were getting closer--how could Snowfern not hear them? Their small sizes had to be hiding the sound of their rush, their pawsteps muffled in the snow. Now down the tall hill, the stoats soon disappeared from Willowpaw's view because of a rise between them.

When she knew she was close enough for her mother to hear, Willowpaw let out a long, low yowl of warning, a plea for her mother to *run*. She couldn't see Snowfern anymore, but soon she crested another hill and spotted her mother with Brightflower, Pine, and Lark.

Snowfern's head was up, ears perked. She spotted Willowpaw, and the apprentice could see her opening her jaws, ready to call back.

Then the wave of stoats appeared, charging down a slope as a single twisting creature. Brightflower let out a cry as she spotted them, and Snowfern had barely turned to look before the brown mass swept them from view.

"*Snowfern!*"

The patrol reached the swarm and didn't hesitate to throw themselves into the fight. Willowpaw grabbed the first stoat she could in her teeth and snapped its neck, then turned to slash at another while grabbing a third and swinging it around. A stoat grabbed onto her shoulder, but she snatched it and threw it away. It hit Foxpounce in the side, and the tom instantly gripped it tight and swung it before letting it free. The limp body slammed into another stoat and they both went tumbling away.

Pain throbbed in Willowpaw's shoulder, but she continued to slash and bite at every small brown body she could. The sounds of battle pounded in her ears, and though she saw flashes of her Clanmates

deep in the horde, she fought alone and quite bravely. She didn't have the chance to search for her mother to make sure she was alright--there were too many stoats swirling around them to ignore, so Willowpaw just focused on killing as many as possible.

Brightflower appeared through the mass of pelts, falling onto her back with five stoats instantly launching onto her. She screeched and scratched and bit, but her sound just drew more of the little monsters to leap at her. Willowpaw threw off a stoat trying to climb on her back and leaped to help her friend, dragging stoat after stoat from Brightflower, throwing them away without care to kill them--she just needed to help Brightflower get back to her paws.

Harsh pain flared in the back of her neck, and Willowpaw wheeled away, crying out. The stoat on her back held tight, blood flooding down Willowpaw's white shoulders. She tried to turn to snap at the thing, but it was too small, right in the nook of her neck that she couldn't reach. Pain pounded in her forehead and made her stumble.

The instant the weakness was shown, she was swept off her paws by squeaking stoats. They bit at her legs, her stomach, her back. She clawed and bit as she tried to get up, but too many of the creatures had crawled over her, their combined weight holding her down.

Her entire body burned, and she knew she was weakening. The crushed snow under her was soaked with her own blood.

StarClan, please, there's too many! She managed to kill one stoat, but two more hurried to replace it.

A thick, hearty yowl rushed strong through the air, a battle cry.

Stoats began to disappear from Willowpaw's vision, and she caught a flash of her savior--a large but lithe gray tabby tom who swatted away stoat after stoat while holding one in his jaws. His gray eyes were strong and determined. It wasn't an EchoClan cat, but Gorsedust, the SageClan deputy!

She realized the sound of the battle was fading. She managed to weakly look around. Her eyes were blurry, but she could see three

unfamiliar warriors chasing after a fleeing group of stoats, yowling and hissing. A cold nose touched Willowpaw's cheek. "Are you okay?"

She weakly turned her gaze back to Gorsedust. He stood over her, eyes wide with worry. She gave a weak mewl, trying to blink away the darkness that clouded her vision. "I..." She winced as pain flooded fresh through her. "I think so," she finally managed.

He nosed her again. "Come on, get up. You need to stay awake." He stepped to her other side and shoved his muzzle under her shoulder. She cried out in pain, but the tom forced her up before pressing against her, letting her lean into his side. His scent was strange, sharp and heathery, but in that moment, she saw no difference between this tom and a Clanmate.

She forced her mind to clear as much as she could manage, looking at those around her. Snowfern's fur was almost completely stained red, and she anxiously tried to help Pine to her paws, while Lark struggled to stand upright next to them. Petaldust and Brightflower were holding each other up, heads rested against each other in exhaustion.

Just then, the three SageClan warriors returned. They bore scratches of battle, but very few. A white she-cat padded to Gorsedust while a young pale tan warrior approached Lark, allowing the young apprentice to lean against her shoulder.

"The rest of the stoats retreated into a burrow," the white she-cat reported to Gorsedust. Her amber gaze turned to Willowpaw, softening with the look only a queen could give. "Oh, little one!" She leaned forward, beginning to clean the bite marks on Willowpaw's neck with the tip of her tongue. The young cat let out a sigh of relief as the pain of the wound faded slightly, and she couldn't help but lean into the white she-cat's touch.

But then Willowpaw saw the third SageClan warrior. The young black tom was taking slow, careful steps closer to Foxpounce. The warrior sat, blooded and beaten, with Featherpaw by his side. Their heads were low, a soft mewl was in Featherpaw's throat... She leaned down to nudge the neck of the limp ginger shape splayed

out in the snow.

A deep dread swirled in Willowpaw's stomach, and she forced herself away from the SageClan warriors, stumbling over to her friend. Flamepaw lay spread out, his blood still soaking farther and farther into the snow. The flesh on his throat was torn wide, and his dark amber eyes stared sightlessly out over the moorland, his muzzle still curled from the fight.

Slowly, moving like an ancient elder, Foxpounce leaned close, and very softly closed his son's eyes with his tongue. "Take him proudly, Russetdawn," Foxpounce whispered, his mew like broken ice, shattered and cold and desperate. "Today he fought like a warrior..."

Willowpaw felt weak. She felt herself sliding, pain throbbing in every part of her body. She felt like she was bitten and scratched everywhere. Before her belly could touch the snow, she was forced back up. The white she-cat was back by her side. "Stay standing, little one. We must return you to your medicine cat."

Gorsedust approached, flicking his tail to urge the black tom away, and he padded close to Petaldust. The tortoiseshell looked hesitant as he neared, but when Brightflower groaned and stumbled, Petaldust flicked his tail to allow the young black tom to draw up to the she-cat's other side and take some of her weight.

Gorsedust took a step closer to Foxpounce. "My son, Stempaw, died late last greenleaf," he said softly. "He took the swipe of a badger to save his brother, Bumbleflight." The tom's gray gaze turned to look at the black tom, and they shared a look of grief. Willowpaw, even in her weak, dizzy state, recognized the black tom must've been Bumbleflight himself.

Foxpounce's ear flicked softly, but he said nothing. One of his paws was rested on Flamepaw's flank, as if he was hoping to feel a tiny movement.

"When my Clanmates tried to move him," Gorsedust continued quietly, "I attacked them. I didn't want to disturb my son... In death, he looked so peaceful, like..."

"Like he was sleeping..." Foxpounce finished in a whisper.

Gorsedust blinked softly in agreement. "But eventually, I realized he deserved to be with his Clanmates, to rest in his home once more. Would it be okay if I carried your son to your camp, so his Clanmates can honor him as he deserves?" Gorsedust spoke softly, his eyes kind and earnest.

Foxpounce ran his paw along his son's pelt, smoothing the ruffled fur. "His mother died not even two moons ago," the broken warrior whispered. "How can I survive without them?"

Featherpaw pressed deeper into Foxpounce's side, a whimper in her throat.

Gorsedust slipped closer. "They both look down on you from the stars," the deputy murmured. "Your mate and son watch from StarClan--they will share your life as if it is their own, hoping for your prosperity. They will wait for you to join them, but first you must live for those who still survive. You mourn for who you have lost, I still do the same, but remember that your daughter is pressed to your flank. She still needs you, more than your mate does. Do not lose yourself in your grief, or your young kit will do the same."

Foxpounce's tail twitched, then slowly drew around Featherpaw's side. Finally, he gave a soft nod. "You... you can take him... Just... be careful?"

Gorsedust was brave enough to touch Foxpounce's ear with his nose. "I will care for him like he is my own."

Gorsedust flicked his tail to the pale tan she-cat, and with a gentle nose she carefully nudged Flamepaw onto Gorsedust's back so his belly ran along the SageClan cat's spine, head rested upon the deputy's neck like a kit getting a badger ride. The she-cat then pressed to Gorsedust's side, holding the dead apprentice still.

Slowly, Gorsedust began to make his way in the direction of the EchoClan camp. Willowpaw felt very numb, and the white SageClan warrior at her side helped her along. She felt her Clanmates following, but she kept her head down, limping with every step.

EchoClan had already lost so much, would they really be able to handle the death of another Clanmate?

She felt like the soul was fading from her Clan. Four warriors--five counting Rain--had left with two apprentices to chase their runaway leader, leaving the Clan weakened and open for an attack. If they hadn't left, would the stoats be less of a danger? Would Flamepaw still be alive if a patrol had not been sent after Acornstar?

I hope it's worth it, she thought. But she had a feeling that it wouldn't be. EchoClan was already falling to misfortune, so why would such an important journey bring something good? So far, the only thing it had done was bring three new apprentices--yes, they were good hunters, but they had taken her parents free time.

Even now, Snowfern walked with Lark and Pine on either side. Her mother hadn't even come to check on her--was she that unimportant to her Clan, to her family? Would anybody even notice if she disappeared?

EchoClan's rescue patrol was not far from them, just a few slopes over. It was not many cats coming to help--Eagleclaw streaked over the snow with Grayblaze and Pebblepeak behind her, Firepaw rushing to keep up. All the available cats EchoClan had left.

They skidded to a stop before the injured cats. "Great StarClan!" Eagleclaw gasped. She looked over all the cats. "Gorsedust! What are you--" her voice broke off as she noticed Flamepaw, and grief flared in her eyes.

Firepaw's eyes suddenly went wide, and he cried out. He tried to rush forward, but Pebblepeak quickly grabbed him, holding him back. He tried to calm him, but Firepaw's desperate cries drowned out the young warrior's words. Then the gentle apprentice slashed Pebblepeak's shoulder, and when the gray tabby leaned back in surprise, the ginger tom raced for his brother.

Foxpounce caught him before he did. For a moment Firepaw fought against him, then his head disappeared in his father's chest, a harsh, mournful yowl deep in his chest.

"We heard the fight as we patrolled the border," the white she-cat explained from Willowpaw's side.

Eagleclaw forced her gaze away from Flamepaw's body. "I... I can't thank you enough. I doubt my cats would've survived without you."

"We need to get them back to camp," Pebblepeak meowed, eyes anxiously looking over his Clanmates. He approached his younger siblings, sniffing them both before sliding to Willowpaw's free side. "I'm sorry you had to fight that battle, Willowpaw," he said softly in her ear. "You were much too young for something so brutal."

Willowpaw gave a soft nod of agreement--border fights were different than this, she knew that. Warriors fought, but they didn't kill. These stoats, though, they fought only to kill, and she could still see the malice in their dark little eyes.

Together, they made a slow way back to EchoClan's camp. The travel up the rocky pathway was terrible for everyone. Eagleclaw took the other side of Gorsedust to make sure Flamepaw stayed on his back. The apprentice looked smaller than ever, and his fur looked dark and dull.

By the time they lowered his body into the snow the sky was almost dark, the moon soon ready to show. Mossrain rushed from his den, pausing in horror to gaze at the apprentice. Movement at the nursery showed Maskdapple appearing. She let out a soft mewl, and she disappeared again.

Mossrain went around the cats, sniffing all of them anxiously. "All of you, to my den," Mossrain ordered. "Gorsedust, you and your warriors as well." He barely seemed to recognize that they were supposed to be enemy warriors.

Foxpounce didn't want to leave Flamepaw's side, but Featherpaw softly nudged her father on, despite the dark look in her eyes. Firepaw stayed behind, pressed against his brother's coat. He was murmuring softly, head tucked in Flamepaw's neck.

Mossrain didn't have enough nests, so he gave them to the most injured cats--Willowpaw ended up in one, and she fell into one with

a gasp. Lark and Pine shared one, while Petaldust sat outside the third nest, which was given to Brightflower. Snowfern settled by Lark and Pine with a groan, while the rest of the cats crouched on the cold stone.

Goldenpool slipped into the den. She looked skinny, with a dull look in her eyes. "Go back to the nursery," Mossrain said instantly, not even looking at the den entrance--his head was deep in his herb storage, paws slipping inside to pull out small piles of shriveled herbs.

"You need help," Goldenpool answered with a raspy meow, and Mossrain didn't argue.

The medicine cats set to work while Snowfern quietly explained what had happened to Eagleclaw.

"I'm just glad we were coming by," Gorsedust meowed when Snowfern explained their rescue by the SageClan patrol.

"You saved our lives," Snowfern told the tom.

Gorsedust looked a little awkward, but Eagleclaw's eyes shone gratefully. "I can't thank you enough, Gorsedust," she said.

The tom nodded. The cats were silent for a moment, then the SageClan deputy looked to his equal. "Eagleclaw, I must ask." His eyes were soft but serious, and the deputies held gazes. "What is wrong in EchoClan? There's... an air around the camp. You can't tell me all is perfect."

Willowpaw looked between the cats, focusing as much as she could on them to ignore the flares of pain from her wounds as Mossrain licked them clean.

Eagleclaw was quiet for a few heartbeats. Then she raised her head, took a deep breath, and announced, "One moon ago, Acornstar disappeared." Gorsedust's eyes widened, but he said nothing as Eagleclaw continued. "I sent a patrol after her, and they have not yet returned."

Gorsedust looked to his paws, tail flicking softly. Then he brought

his gaze back up to meet Eagleclaw's. "How many uninjured warriors do you have?"

The intrusive question gave even Willowpaw a bad feeling, but Gorsedust still looked so open and honest, it was hard to feel skeptical that he meant them harm.

It seemed Eagleclaw agreed, for she answered the tom quite quickly. "Maskdapple is expecting kits, and is staying in the nursery to keep them from possible harm. Oakcloud has been protecting camp, watching for stoats. And I must be careful to not leave camp unless necessary, for my death would be the end of EchoClan. So, technically, only Grayblaze and Pebblepeak are able hunters, not counting the apprentices, though there are only three uninjured... two, more likely."

Willowpaw wondered, *was it Firepaw she left out, or Blossompaw?*

Gorsedust watched her for a moment. His eyes were touched with sympathy and grief. Then, finally, "We killed the majority of the stoats that attacked the patrol. My warriors and I will take as many of their bodies from the battle site and bring them back to your Clan. They will keep you fed for a little while, especially if you try to freeze some in the thick snow."

"That is very generous," Eagleclaw began.

"We will not let EchoClan suffer," he interrupted, to make sure she didn't try to deny the offer. "I am also going to speak to Dewstar, but I believe she will agree with me when I offer this--SageClan will leave your border with our territory safe. Until your warriors are healed, don't mark our border, keep your strength and don't travel so far. We both know BatClan will not cross the Old Thunderpath, either, so I trust that border will be safe as well. Mark only along the mountains and by the unclaimed territory. Let your Clan grow strong. But I ask for permission--if we are on our territory and see stoats on your hills--"

This time, it was Eagleclaw who cut him off. "You are free to cross and kill them as you please." Eagleclaw's eyes glowed with faint relief. "Gorsedust, I cannot begin to thank SageClan for this

kindness. I plead you to take some of the dead stoats for your Clan, as well--they are a good meal."

Gorsedust gave a soft nod. "Thank you, Eagleclaw, but don't thank me for the help. If SageClan was in trouble like this, I would wish for some cat to help us as we have helped you. Our Clans have fought for too many moons, but I believe this can be a changing point for us. It's not right for us to fight and growl when these stoats have shown that there are bigger threats."

Willowpaw stared at the tom. Suddenly, the differences of the Clans and the distance of the borders between them seemed much, *much* smaller.

I know this is quite different from the accidental version I uploaded earlier, but I like this a lot more. What happened in the early version will still likely happen, but I wanted to change the order of some events to fit better. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed! Also, I can't help but be proud of myself because, technically, this Chapter isn't late, I still have an hour until the day is over (for me, at least). So, yeah, I'm proud of myself, though I probably should've been more on top of the situation.

Chapter Eleven

"Ravenpaw, Ravenpaw wake up."

The small apprentice blinked open his eyes. Pale sunlight shined through the small openings high in the den's walls. He looked blearily at the elder tom, blinking to clear his mind. "Hmm?" he mewled.

"Wake yourself up, I hear Newt's call sign. Listen."

Instantly fueled, Ravenpaw struggled to a sit, shook himself awake, and perked his ears, though he still felt a little unsteady. Quite quickly he heard a muffled, furious barking. He shivered. "There are dogs here?" he asked scaredly.

"In the other part of the Trap-den. Newt told me Teera told him how to get in and out, but he's never tried it or explained it to me. He did mention there was something to do with dogs, and if their barking got really loud, he might be coming."

They waited, listening attentively. Ravenpaw wondered, if Newt was coming, why would it be in the day? Wouldn't the night be safer? It would harder to be seen, and more Twolegs would be asleep. Perhaps it was a false alarm?

But then Hail pointed out a small shape slipping between the two lines of cages. Cats mewled in surprise at the sight of the pale orange tabby stalking along, looking inside a few of the cages. "Hey, let me out!" one cat called.

"Newt!" Hail hissed, keeping his voice low. Ravenpaw realized the two were trying to draw the least amount of attention.

The tom's ears flicked, and his deep amber eyes turned to see the old tom. His gaze suddenly glowed, and he hurried over. Ravenpaw and Hail's cages weren't on the bottom, with a row of cages under them--the other day, Ravenpaw had briefly spoken to the tom who

lay under them, but he wasn't too talkative.

Newt stretched up, peering over the edge. His face was pale, white lining his pink nose and around his eyes with a few darker stripes on his forehead and cheeks. "Finally!" The tom, who looked about nine to ten moons old, had a glow of relief in his eyes. "You're lucky you're here, it was a pain in the tail getting inside! I think I lost some fur..." He looked down at his side, then back at his friend. "Ready to come home, or are you enjoying your stay?"

Hail snorted. "Another day and I might be sent through the Last Door."

Newt purred then reached up to the side of the cage, near the middle. He played with some of the hard vines there, nosing around and tugging on a little solid piece that stuck out. Suddenly, Hail's cage door swung open, and Newt jumped away to avoid getting hit.

Hail stretched then leaped lightly down.

By now, other cats were beginning to notice. "Get me out of here!" a she-cat called. "I'm not interested in becoming a housecat!"

Newt's eyes briefly shone with guilt. "Too many cats will get us caught," Newt called to the cats. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Ravenpaw pressed to the front of his cage, worry gripping his chest. Would Hail leave him? Oh, StarClan, no!

But to his immense relief, the old tom glanced up at him. "Newt, Ravenpaw will be coming with us. I've promised him our help. Trust me, he'll be useful."

Ravenpaw didn't like how Hail put that last part, but he stayed quiet as Newt raised his gaze up to him. He looked hesitant, then he padded over, reached up, and met Ravenpaw's gaze close up.

"You look like a housecat, so why do you want out?" he asked. His tone wasn't exactly hostile, more curious without a polite tone.

"I'm a wild cat," Ravenpaw told him, trying to stop the quiver in his meow. "I need to get back to my family. And... I can't really survive

alone... I can't hunt."

Newt's ears went back. "What kind of wild cat can't hunt? Even most housecats can hunt!"

Shame burned Ravenpaw's pelt. "I just don't like to, okay? I'm a medicine cat--I use herbs and stuff."

Newt's attitude changed immediately. His eyes brightened curiously, and his ears perked. "Herbs? So you heal cats when their injured?"

Ravenpaw hesitantly nodded.

Newt looked thoughtful for a second. "Would you teach me? Like, just the simple stuff." A hopeful gleam touched his eyes.

Ravenpaw was surprised, and scared at the idea, but he nodded. "I'm only in training myself, but I know the most useful herbs pretty well, I think. So, yeah, I could. What do you want to know for?"

Newt looked away, while Hail said, "I'm glad you two are bonding, but we should get going. We can talk more once we're safe."

Newt nodded quickly. "Right. Yeah." He reached up, opened Ravenpaw's cage, and the apprentice hurried to leap down. Cats called out, some sad and scared while others frustrated or angry. Newt led the two cats back down the pathway.

Ravenpaw forced himself to look down because seeing all the scared faces on either side of him made his heart hurt. He hated leaving these cats, but he had to trust Newt when he said it was dangerous to bring extra cats. Ravenpaw soon learned why.

At the end of the pathway when the cages ended, Newt brought them to the corner of the den, where, next to a pile of flat boulder-like things with the faint scent of food coming from them, was a sharp-edged hole in the stone floor.

Hail's ears flicked in surprise. "A vent?" he asked in confusion.

"Only for a bit," Newt answered. "Follow close, and stay quiet,

sounds get really loud." Newt, instead of jumping down, crouched and reached out his front paws, touching the silvery ground underneath and letting the rest of his body slide down. His back paws thumped down and the sound that echoed made Ravenpaw shiver--it was an unnatural sound, definitely not one that could be spawned in the forest.

Hail sent Ravenpaw next, and the moment he slipped inside after Newt, he wished he hadn't. The place was small, barely taller than he was, just a long tunnel made of a bright, cold gray color. He shuffled forward awkwardly as Hail came down as well. The tom looked even more stuffed and uncomfortable.

Newt led them along on soft paws. Ravenpaw realized stale air was pushing toward him, like a draft of wind. He wondered if the tunnel opened to sunlight, but they didn't find out--soon a new opening appeared above their heads, and Newt leaped out. Ravenpaw scrambled out after him, immensely relieved to have more space. They were in a new part of the Trap-den, a small area filled with all sorts of strange Twoleg things, including the sharp-edged wooden boulders like those at the abandoned Twoleg den.

A pang of loss touched his heart as he thought of Silverstrike, but he pushed it away and focused on Newt, who was moving to the corner of the small den space. "Stay close to me, and don't freak." Without any more explanation, Newt pushed his way through a small hole low in the wall. Ravenpaw approached the hole and found a harsh dog smell coming from the other side.

He swallowed, taking a step back.

Hail approached him, brushing his fur against the young apprentice's. "Trust in Newt, Ravenpaw. He knows what to do."

Forcing a quiet nod, Ravenpaw pushed himself on through the small opening. They were in a long, narrow den, each side lined with large cages. Most were open and empty, but in a few large furry mounds revealed themselves as sleeping dogs. Ravenpaw was ready to run back into the hole, but Hail was behind him, letting his fur brush against the apprentice's for comfort.

"Most dogs are outside right now," Newt told the cats softly. He led them forward, paws silent on the smooth stone floor. They got closer and closer to the first dog, a giant creature with black and brown fur. It's scent was strong and harsh.

And so faintly familiar.

Ravenpaw's steps faltered, and he stared at the dog. It had a thick wad of white cobwebs covering its front leg, and seemed to be missing some clumps of fur, some small scratches on its side beginning to scab over. The marks were small enough to be from a cat.

This... This was one of the dogs from the abandoned Twoleg den... One of the dogs that had killed Silverstrike.

Hail's tail curled over Ravenpaw's back, convincing the young tom along. Ravenpaw pressed close to the tom as they neared the dog. He saw it's nose twitch, and its eyes leaped open.

"Now!" Newt shot forward, racing as fast as he could down the pathway. Ravenpaw and Hail were right behind him. The dog howled and screeched, throwing itself against the walls of its cage, howling to the air in a desperate attempt to escape. The cats shot past more dogs, who had all woken up from the noise and joined the horrible barking, sending Ravenpaw right back to the day he had lost Silverstrike. He even spotted the white and black dog his brothers had fought, and was that the yellow one Silverstrike faced, or just one that looked similar?

Suddenly they reached the end of the pathway, facing a Twoleg door. Newt pressed against the wall next to it, flicking his tail for the cats to copy him. The dogs were getting louder, shaking their cages as they reared against the silvery vine enclosure. Ravenpaw pressed against the ground, remembering the feeling of the Twoleg den shivering under his paws, seeing Silverstrike fail his leap and be taken by those gaping jaws...

Then the door was thrown open, and a Twoleg appeared, hurrying in to check on the dogs. Before it could close again, Newt shot through, and Hail shoved Ravenpaw after. He followed

instinctively, eyes locked on Newt's tail. He didn't look at anything else, knowing his anxiety wouldn't be able to handle it.

He saw flashes of Twolegs, who shouted and shook the ground as they gave chase. But they ran and ran, dodging and weaving. Newt made an incredible leap up onto a tall wooden boulder cluttered with small, strange Twoleg objects. A Twoleg behind the giant sharp boulder leaped away in surprise, then reached for Ravenpaw as he scrambled up.

He narrowly missed the outstretched paw, following Newt into another leap that sent them both sailing out an opening in the Twoleg den's wall.

And sudden fresh air surrounded him as he escaped out of the Trap-den.

The ground was hard and sent shockwaves through his legs despite the snow, and he cried out but kept running. He shot a quick look back, seeing Hail scramble out the den just in time, a Twoleg paw brushing his tail. But the old tom landed on the ground and was after them without hesitation. His eyes glowed with strength and exhilaration.

The three cats thundered across a flat, open expanse of snow, dotted with sleeping monsters. To the cats luck, they were deep in sleep and didn't bother to wake. Newt only slowed when they neared a Thunderpath, monsters flashing past every few moments.

All three cats were gasping for breath, and Ravenpaw looked at his paws to see they were raw and torn, bleeding from a few spots. They said nothing as they got their breathing under control, taking deep breaths of icy leaf-bare air.

"Thank you, Newt," Hail finally meowed, chest still heaving heavily. "I must know, the way in is different than the way out, isn't it?"

Newt nodded, looking hesitant. "Well, yeah, makes it harder for the Tallwalkers to realize what's happening." Newt, who had settled in a crouch, stood up and shook out his coat. "Can we please get back to the forest?"

"You mean Mot--" Ravenpaw cut himself off. "I mean, the rogues' forest?"

Hail nodded. "I mentioned we lived there? Well, we're not too far, about a day's travel, less if we keep a good pace and don't run into trouble."

"Where will we appear in the forest?" Ravenpaw asked. "Is it close to the abandoned Twoleg den, or the Thunderpath that makes the edge of the rogues' territory?"

Hail's eyes shined with sympathy. "I'm sorry, but no. We're on the complete opposite side. I promise, once we arrive in the forest we'll stop by our den, rest and eat, then go find your family as quick as possible. We'll reach the abandoned den within two days."

Ravenpaw nodded. "We stayed in the forest near there, in a small clearing on the other side of the Thunderpath." *Please, StarClan, let them be there. I want to go home.* Without his Clanmates, he would never be able to return to EchoClan--how could he travel for half a moon without knowing how to hunt or fight?

Soon Hail began to lead the way along. Not many monsters ran along the Thunderpaths--Hail said Twolegs and monsters were out at sunrise and sundown, while around this time, barely sunhigh, most didn't appear.

This fact made it quite easy to pass Thunderpaths, with long gaps between each monster that came along. They traveled silently to save their breath. But Ravenpaw quickly realized that though Hail was smart and resourceful, he was still an elder, and quite often he had to stop to rest, breathing heavy and complaining of muscle pain.

"It'll stop soon," the old tom sighed as he ducked the small group into what he called an alleyway between two large, flat-topped Twoleg dens. "Just some aches."

Ravenpaw was surprised that Hail was open with the weakness--he had expected the tom might be sensitive about his age, but he seemed rather accepting. "Have you ever tried daisy leaves? Or, uh,

what is it called... uh... Oh! Fennel! Have you tried fennel?"

Hail tilted his head. "I've never heard of either. What are they?"

"Herbs," Ravenpaw explained. Newt instantly looked interested. "Daisy leaves you chew into a paste and rub on wherever it aches, while fennel, if I remember right, you break the stalks and drink the juice. Yeah, yeah that seems right. Mossrain didn't teach me much about it because it doesn't grow in our territory--it grows in CrowClan territory, though, so Hawkstream gives us some sometimes."

Newt looked confused, but nodded either way. "Will you show me what they look like?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, of course! It's hard to find good herbs in leaf-bare, but there are some, though they are a little shriveled." Ravenpaw shivered, the cold suddenly amplified. He hoped he remembered enough about herbs that he wouldn't cause trouble by giving out wrong advice. I *mess up yarrow with tansy or marigold, I could hurt someone, or even kill them!* He distracted himself with running through the herbs as quick as he could, refreshed he still remembered so much. It had almost been a moon since he last saw Mossrain, but every day he ran through what he knew. He knew his abilities, and he was almost... confident in them. Almost.

Hail let out a deep sigh. "I shouldn't keep us much longer."

Ravenpaw was anxious to return to the den under the tree to see if his family was still there, but he could see the strain in Hail's eyes. Even though he admitted the pain, the old tom was feeling worse than he let on. "It's okay. Honestly, I'm a little tired, too." Ravenpaw lay down next to Hail, flipping over his front paws. They were raw and stinging from traveling, and his muscles did burn from going so far after resting for, what, a quarter moon?

Hail snorted, rolling his eyes, but Newt didn't seem to mind, either, and he settled down next to them. "I could go look for something to eat?" he suggested, drawing his tail close to sniff at the bare patches there. It looked like he might've had a run in with a dog, possibly while getting inside the Trap-den.

"No, we'll be fine for now," Hail decided. "We'll eat at our next stop."

Newt nodded, sinking closer to the snow. He flicked his tail away and leaned to the side, letting his legs stretch out. "I'm glad to have you back, Hail," the young tom meowed after a moment.

Hail purred, gazing fondly at the tom. "I'm glad *to* be back." He then cast a glance at Ravenpaw. "And I'm glad to have you with us, too. I have a feeling a lot of things will change around here, with your help, at least."

Ravenpaw ducked his head and busied himself with cleaning his chest, heat rising from his pelt. Hail said nothing else, but he still felt the old tom's gaze on him.

They headed out at sunhigh after a comfortable rest, with Hail moving much faster. Ravenpaw least favorite part were the Twolegs--most didn't pay attention to them, while a few lashed out to chase them away. They didn't chase the cats, though, so they didn't have to run far. That didn't make it less terrifying each time it happened, though.

Eventually they left the huge Twoleg dens behind a crossed by the dens Twolegs lived in, though they were bigger than the ones next to the forest, with their gardens much larger. Many even had trees and bushes, and when resting under a snowy fern bush Newt managed to find a squirrel hiding in one of the short trees. It was large enough for them all to share. They had crossed a lot of territory, with the sky turning orange in the distance as the sun settled low.

Crouched under the bush, pressing against the snow, Ravenpaw felt more homesick than ever. He missed the wonderful scents of the medicine cat's den, the softness of his nest. More than that, he missed his family. How were his sisters, who he hadn't seen for a moon? His brothers, were they still searching for him, or had they left? Not knowing about what his future held made Ravenpaw's chest contract--he had always known, though been scared of, that he would become a full medicine cat one day. But now he didn't

even know if he would ever see another Clan cat again.

"Ravenpaw?" Hail was looking at him. "Is everything alright?"

Ravenpaw was quiet for a moment. "Not really," he admitted. It didn't feel right to lie about his feelings to the cats who had saved him. "I miss my family. I don't know if I could ever get home without them..."

Hail blinked with understanding. "I know you're worried, but you need to control yourself. Overthinking everything just makes it worse. Just live moment by moment, and wait and see. If your family is there, you don't need to worry at all. If they aren't, you needn't worry still--Newt and I can teach you to survive, and maybe one day you'll be able to go off by yourself. Or they'll return for you. You can't know, so you shouldn't worry about it."

That was *much* easier said than done, but Ravenpaw just gave a quiet nod, promising to himself to at least try.

It wasn't quite late enough to rest for the night, so the small group continued on for a while longer. Monsters were more common now, but as the sky darkened they began to look for places to sleep. There were quite a few gardens, but Hail was hesitant with many of them because he knew most Twolegs would be home. Eventually, Newt got the old tom to settle in a large den's front garden, right next to the path beside the Thunderpath--apparently, it was called a street.

They made nests by taking shriveled fronds from a fern bush and making nests with them under a bush that only had a thin layer of leaves and many small, intertwining branches inside. Newt dug out the snow and crumbled the fronds inside, making sure they lay flat and thick. Despite protests, Hail was given the prime spot right next to the stem. Newt settled on the other side the tom, the stem in between them, while Ravenpaw curled up at the free space by Hail's side.

Feeling Hail's fur made him feel like a kit again, curled up at his mother's stomach. Pain touched his heart as he ached for his family more than ever, and the cold leaf-bare air chilled his coat, rushing

strong as if just to make him more uncomfortable. *StarClan, if you can still see me, take care of my family. If I don't see them again, don't let them mourn me... I have a feeling that, one day, I'll be okay, once the pain ends.*

I just want to put a reminder in case someone didn't see the announcement I posed about it, I accidently uploaded Chapter Ten before I did a rewrite of it. If you didn't witness a battle scene involving Willowpaw in the last chapter, you might want to run back and do a re-read! Alright, thanks, and I hope you've enjoyed!

Author's Note

So, I've been pretty busy these past few weeks, and it's made it hard to write Clouded Skies because I haven't had as much free time. I don't have a Chapter ready for this week, and I know I'll still be pretty busy for at least two weeks. With that being said, Clouded Skies is going to go on a short hiatus. I don't know when it will return, most likely within a month. When Chapter Twelve is updated, whenever that is, I'll also put up a part that details what's happened so far in the book as a reminder in case anything is forgotten, or you just want a refresher. I'll still check on Wattpad every day, so if you ever have a question you want to ask about anything, go ahead, I'll answer the best I can!

Also, a big thank you to everyone who has been reading the story since the beginning, it's been quite an adventure so far, and I hope it continues!

Recap

So, I'm back from my hiatus (as far as I know). I know it's been a while, and I am sorry for that, so I figured a recap of the book so far would be useful. I hope it helps! Also, Happy New Year.

Prologue:
Echo is exploring the Black Forest of Banished Warriors (my version of the Dark Forest) with a group of StarClan cats, including her mate Rootstar and two of her kits, Moonglow and Starlingclaw. They briefly argue about Brookstar corrupting Blossompaw and how they should've stopped it, but Echo knows that EchoClan must fight their own battles. They then run into Brookstar, who taunts Echo. She discovers that StarClan doesn't have the power to stop her like she thought and promises that EchoClan will one day be hers again. She disappears into nothing, leaving Echo and her group to attempt to escape the Black Forest, as they have no special powers there.

Chapter One:
Blazepaw watches as his Clan suffers from outbreaks of whitecough while grieving for the loss of Bloomcloud and the exile of Rowanpaw. Leafcloud and Carppaw return from patrol to announce Snowfern had appeared with the kits of Dawnstar's son. After meeting with them, Dawnstar refuses to let the kits into BatClan for their own safety, which angers many of her Clanmates. Dawnstar does her best to calm them before ending the meeting, and Blazepaw goes hunting with a patrol in the new territory gained from CrowClan. He begins to understand Hickoryclaw better and is impressed by his skill despite having been a loner. Blazepaw proves to be a good hunter.

Chapter Two:
Jaypaw is waiting at the temporary den the patrol had set up underneath a tree, waiting for the patrol to return from fetching Silverstrike's. Frostfall is having a nightmare in the den,

traumatized by the death of Silverstrike early that morning. Acornstar is sitting nearby, silent and staring at the sky. The day continues to pass and Jaypaw ends up pacing the tree, and it's just past sundown when Rain, Shadefur, and Stonecoat finally return, completely exhausted, and it's revealed to Jaypaw that Ravenpaw had been stolen by Twolegs. Acornstar scorns the patrol about how useless the journey to fetch her was, and Shadefur snaps at her that she should've died seasons ago, and the estranged leader agrees. Jaypaw realizes that he hates the leader, but Rain steers the conversation back to finding Ravenpaw. Jaypaw tells Frostfall and the she-cat is quick to agree they need to find him, and the patrol heads for the Twolegplace, leaving Acornstar behind.

Chapter Three:
Ravenpaw wakes up in a place called the Trap-den in a small cage. In the cage next to him is the old tom who had helped the patrol find Acornstar. He also meets Jade, a she-cat who tries to help calm his anxiety about being lost from his Clan. Hail reveals he takes care of a young tom, Newt, and if he managed to find Hail in the Trap-den, the two will help Ravenpaw find his family. This calms Ravenpaw a little, but when he goes to sleep, he has a nightmare of being in a shadowed forest, completely alone. He's forced to run as the forest closes around him and he ends up going down a dark tunnel that gets smaller and smaller until he was crushed.

Chapter Four:
Willowpaw awakes cold in her nest, her first thought being a wish that Blossompaw would come back to the nest to share warmth. Eventually she can't handle just lying there and goes to the clearing, briefly visiting the medicine cat's den where it's shown that Goldenpool had developed a strange illness that caused a lump to appear on her side. Maskdapple has also moved to the den. She decides to go on an early hunting patrol with Petaldust and Brightflower, and they end up hunting on the moor. But they find a strange smell coming from a tunnel and Brightflower is sent back to camp to fetch an older warrior. Petaldust takes this time to share his insecurities of Silverstrike not loving him and seems scared that he might not know how to be a father one day. Before they can continue much farther, they are attacked by a small, strange animal. They kill it quickly and when Blossomdawn arrives with

Boulderclaw, the old warrior announces it's a stoat. They return to EchoClan and share the news with Eagleclaw, who sends Boulderclaw and patrol to check the stoats.

Chapter Five:
Jaypaw is having a bad dream about not being able to protect his littermates, and he briefly watches Silverstrike dying again before being woken. The cats are in the Twolegplace, in search of Ravenpaw. They begin their search of the missing medicine cat but for a long time come up with nothing until they find an air-headed young tom named Felix. He brings them to his Twoleg's home, where, behind it, was a beautiful garden full of plants and even a small stream and pond. They're introduced to an elderly cat, Sawyer, who tells them of the Trap-den and that the only cat who can break in and out died a few moons ago. They decide to try to find the Trap-den to wait out Ravenpaw's time there, but Frostfall reveals they can't wait much longer because she needs to get home to EchoClan in time to have her kits. She also reals the father is Silverstrike, despite him already having a mate.

Chapter Six:
Ravenpaw wakes the morning after his dream quite shaken but makes himself feel better by talking with Hail about EchoClan. Not long after Jade is taken from her cage to be reunited with her Twolegs, while Hail begins to explain his own life, how he had first been a kittypet but became a loner to be with his mate, Bell. But she ended up dying, killed by MothClan warriors while carrying Hail's kits. Now, Hail cared for Newt, keeping him safe and teaching him to survive. They continue talking for a while, and after Ravenpaw admits his fear of being left behind by his family, Hail chides him, promising that he and Newt will take care of Ravenpaw, no matter what happens.

Chapter Seven:
Jaypaw and the patrol have been at Felix and Sawyer's home for three days. Jaypaw is caught up thinking about the future, once they returned to EchoClan, wondering how the Clan would react to Silverstrike's death and the parentage of Frostfall's litter. He talks to Sawyer for a while, waiting for Rain, Shadefur, Stonecoat, and Felix to come back from searching for the Trap-den. Eventually, they do,

with no luck on finding the den or Ravenpaw. The cats know a decision has to be made, and they all regretfully agree they have to get Frostfall home before her kits come, and that means leaving Ravenpaw behind. Rain makes a promise that he'll return for him, but the decision still lies heavy in everyone's hearts.

Chapter Eight:
The patrol leaves the Twolegplace behind and checks the old den for Ravenpaw in a final effort, but neither Ravenpaw nor Acornstar is found. They start their journey back home in silence, but end up stumbling upon Acornstar, trapped by a MothClan patrol and already injured, but when they attack, she is quick to dodge. Shadefur and Stonecoat instantly join the fight, while Rain hesitates at first, and Jaypaw realizes Rain is scared, but he forces himself on. Jaypaw is surprised at Acornstar's skill and speed but is distracted by Rain's fight where his connection with the rogues is revealed and he ends up killing his opponent, who was also revealed to be his father. Stonecoat accidentally kills one of the cats attacking Acornstar, while Rain purposely kills the final member, so he doesn't go running back to MothClan. At first, Shadefur, Stonecoat, and Frostfall are furious at Rain, but Jaypaw manages to get them to trust Rain just enough. They realize Acornstar is bleeding out, and the she-cat just manages to say that she refuses to come back despite still having lives left before passing on. The cats wait but she doesn't move, so Shadefur, taking over the patrol, decides that they'll bury her.

Chapter Nine:
Blazepaw is in the nursery with his sisters, watching Hopekit, a moon and a half old, leave her nest for the first time. Blazepaw reflects on how proud he thinks Rowanpaw would be of not only Hopekit but his sisters, as well. He leaves to go hunting but promises Primkit he'll be back, as he has been sleeping in the nursery. He leaves camp with Hazelfur, who is his temporary mentor, along with the deputy Clovertail, Hickoryclaw, and Brackenfoot. They hunt in the territory given by CrowClan but end up following the scent of a fox to the entrance to the Old Twolegplace, where Blazepaw gets a horrible feeling something is wrong just moments before a group of foxes attack. His opponent is a very young female, and he proves to have an instinctive fighting

ability, though he gets quite injured. The fox gets scared away quick and he manages to help Clovertail by distracting her fox briefly. After the fight, he's praised for his skill, but is advised to learn how to not get bitten so much.

Chapter Ten:
Willowpaw has an interaction with her parents that leaves her feeling jealous of Rock, Lark, and Pine for taking all their time, but forces her feelings down because the young loner kits needed help a lot more than she did. She goes on a border patrol with Petaldust, Foxpounce, Featherpaw, Firepaw, and Flamepaw. They plan to meet up with another patrol (Snowfern, Brightflower, Lark, and Pine) on the moor, but arrive just after Snowfern's patrol is attacked by a horde of stoats. The two patrols fight but are nearly overwhelmed until a SageClan patrol, led by the deputy Gorsedust, helps chase them off, with the deputy saving Willowpaw's life in the process. Flamepaw died during the battle, and Gorsedust bonds with Foxpounce enough to let him carry the body back to EchoClan. Gorsedust and Eagleclaw talk and the EchoClan deputy reveals their current weaknesses. Gorsedust offers the help of SageClan, bonding the two rival Clans.

Chapter Eleven:
Ravenpaw meets Newt when he comes to rescue Hail from the Trap-den. Newt is interested when Ravenpaw mentions he is a medicine cat and asks to be taught about herbs. Hail interrupts them, and Newt leads them to the place where dogs are kept, where Ravenpaw recognizes some as the dogs that had attacked the patrol at the abandoned Twoleg den. They then escape through an open window and are freed from the Trap-den. Ravenpaw bonds with the two as they make their way to Hail's den in the forest outside MothClan's territory. He's scared that his family might've left him but Hail seems ready to help him no matter what happens.

And now we're all caught up. I hope all that is good enough information to remember what happened, I know I left the story for a lot longer than planned, but it was needed. I wasn't writing as much as I wish I was, but recently I've been speeding up just enough to feel comfortable with uploading again. I don't know how often it will be, though. It might be

only twice a month, I can't be quite sure yet. But, at least it will be (hopefully) better than nothing. Thanks for waiting for so long.

Chapter Twelve

Jaypaw thundered through a forest thick with darkness. His paws thudded over the leaf-strewn ground, throwing up scraps in his wake. He dodged bracken and brambles made of long, slashing claws that stretched out to reach him. Giant jaws of shadow appeared from nowhere, snapping at his paws and shoulders to impede his travel.

He skidded to a horrified stop as a huge form manifested from the darkness, a black shape made of twisting shadows. A cat-like face, three times the regular size, stared down at Jaypaw, eyes opening to reveal an endless white gaze brighter than the freshest snow. A growl like thunder sliced into his ears, bouncing around his head with relentless force.

"Suffer," the shadow growled, "as I have!"

It dived toward him, giant jaws gaping wide as if to swallow him whole. Spinning on his paws, Jaypaw had never run faster, blundering blindly through undergrowth that clawed and caught in his skin, trying to grab him and pull him to the shadowy cat hunting him like a terrified mouse. Clumps of fur were left behind each time he tore himself free, but he could hear the creature getting closer and closer, its monstrous paws shaking the ground at each great bound it took.

With a horrible yowl, its jaws covered his vision, and he was left in darkness.

But only a brief moment passed before Jaypaw was opening his eyes to a bright, dazzling sun burning his vision. As the pain died and the brightness dulled, he found himself lying on his side in the EchoClan clearing, staring out at the edge of camp, dropping straight down to the moorland far below. He couldn't see the territory, just the distant horizon over the Old Twolegplace, a morning sun slowly rising to a warm day.

He couldn't see his Clanmates, but he could smell them, their scents swirling strong in his throat. One stood out, stronger than others because

of how desperate he was to smell it again--Snowfern. His mother's scent had always been warm and slightly sharp, almost like sap. He missed her so much it made his chest burn with pain.

"My poor kit," Snowfern's mew was soft, and he felt her tail brush his shoulder. He tried to look up at her, but he couldn't move, not in the slightest--he didn't even blink, despite how long he stared at the horizon; he just stared, frozen, listening to the mingling voices around him.

"He was too young," Eagleclaw meowed. "But his death was StarClan's will."

Death? *Jaypaw thought, a cold chill slowly seeping into his fur.* But I'm not dead! *He tried to speak, to show them he was alive, but like every other part of his body, his mouth stayed still. He put every bit of focus on his tail, hoping to just give it the slightest flick, but he felt no movement, and no cat reacted.* Please, just look at my eyes! See I'm alive!

"Perhaps it was for the best," Foxpounce, his mentor, meowed. Jaypaw's heart faltered at the words, stinging in his chest and repeating in his head. "He wasn't all that strong--I never saw anything too important during his training."

"Foxpounce," Boulderclaw began slowly, giving a pause before he continued. Jaypaw felt a flash of relief, knowing that Boulderclaw--his father, the cat who was always ready to calm him, encourage him--would stand up for him. "I'm afraid you may be right."

No! *Jaypaw's stomach clenched, his heart sinking deep into his chest as the pain became too much to bear. Snowfern's tail brushed down his side but it did little to calm the burning in his heart.*

"I'm ready," the she-cat said softly.

"Would you like help?" Acornstar asked.

"No," Snowfern answered. "Boulderclaw and I will do it alone."

"Good." He heard Foxpounce stand and shake his pelt. "I'm going to go rest--I finally have some free time to myself! Have fun getting your claws dirty."

And that's when Jaypaw realized what was happening. He tried everything he could, from twitching a paw to flicking his ear, even trying to get his nose to curl. But everything failed, and he cried helplessly in his mind as Snowfern dragged him onto Boulderclaw's back, draping him like a squirrel over his father's shoulders. His limp tail dragged over the ground as Boulderclaw made his way down the rocky pathway, Snowfern brushing against his side.

When Boulderclaw took the last step down to the moorland, Jaypaw felt his body sliding. He tried to stop it instinctively, trying to reach out with his paws, but still, he was paralyzed. Snowfern steadied him by grabbing his shoulder with his teeth. It hurt, but he couldn't even cry out. When he was steady, she let go and continued on by her mate's side.

They said nothing the entire walk, and Jaypaw hated it. He wanted them to say something, anything, because the silence was deafening.

Then they stopped, and Snowfern grabbed Jaypaw's scruff and dragged him off Boulderclaw. His haunches thumped to the ground and pain spiraled through his body but his silent cry stuck in his throat.

"Where should we do it?" Snowfern asked, arriving in Jaypaw's vision. She looked around the countless mounds, most covered in grass, a few too recent to be hidden.

"Wherever," Boulderclaw answered.

Please, *Jaypaw tried to say,* please just look at me. See I'm still here! *He knew what was happening, and he* needed *it to stop.*

But then his parents moved forward, left him behind. They found a spot between two mounds and began to dig. Despite so many attempts before, Jaypaw continued to try every way possible to move, focusing every bit of his determination on each part of his body.

He couldn't even twitch his whiskers.

Please, *his thoughts were weak, exhausted after struggling to show he was still alive.* Please...

"I begged, too."

He appeared from nothing, a shimmering silver form with the moorland stretching out behind his transparent figure. His fur was messy, smeared red with fresh blood; he was missing one ear, an older wound only recently healed; his blue eyes were sharp with misery.

Silverstrike, *Jaypaw thought simply.*

The tom took a step forward, the overwhelming scent of dog and blood filling Jaypaw's muzzle. "Death calls to us all," he said simply. "It's your turn, now."

Boulderclaw's scent swirled around him, his teeth dug into Jaypaw's scruff. He tugged his son's limp body across the grass and let him tumble into the deep hole they had dug. Jaypaw landed in a heap, pain flooding from where his shoulder hit the ground first. His head stung and he wanted to whimper but he once again found the silent sound filling his throat, refusing to burst through his muzzle.

From where he landed, Jaypaw could still see the sky, see his parents staring down at him. "At least we have the others," Snowfern meowed. "They were always stronger--even Ravenpaw."

Boulderclaw gave a confirming nod. "He would've never made it to a warrior."

And that's when they began to bury him. Soil filled the hole, bit by bit, covering his fur. It curled around his muzzle, slowly getting higher and higher until it began to smother him. It filled his mouth and spilled down his throat, pressing heavily on his body and beginning to crush him under the weight. Slowly, pawful of soil after pawful of soil, Jaypaw was buried alive.

The apprentice woke with a gasp, shivering at the cold night air that bit at his pelt. Dead bracken shifted under him as he moved, struggling to get his breathing under control. He felt the soft fur of Stonecoat by his spine and turned to look at his brother, using the sight of him curled up with Shadefur to reassure himself.

It was just a dream, he told himself firmly, turning to brush his tongue over his gray and white fur, showing himself that though it was messy, it was mostly clean. It was just a dream, like the last

three-- three nights he had gone to sleep only to find himself being buried alive in some sort of way. He knew why the dream continued to come, the reason was with him every waking moment, curled up in the corner of the bramble bush they were using as a den:

Acornstar.

They had been halfway through digging her grave when the she-cat woke, gasping, from death, the wounds on her neck and belly--her most devastating wounds--somehow almost completely healed. Frostfall told them she truly thought Acornstar had died forever, with how long she had been still. Stonecoat and Shadefur had been angry with Acornstar, though that was merely a way to get away from the fear that they had almost buried a cat alive. But no matter how she was questioned, even three days later Acornstar wouldn't say anything.

Well, no, she did say something, one sentence right after she woke--"they have abandoned us"--but it was easier for Jaypaw to convince himself she said nothing, instead, because his faith in StarClan was the only thing that told him Ravenpaw was safe and alive.

He realized Rain wasn't in the den but quickly spotted the tom's shadowed gray tabby coat sat outside the bush--protecting them as always. Shadefur and Stonecoat had taken the last three nights, refusing to trust Rain to watch them while they slept, but yesterday after the three went out hunting, they returned with the decision to let Rain guard from sunset to moonhigh.

Though, Jaypaw could feel in the air that it was well past moonhigh, the air too light but not quite touched orange by the sun. Slowly, he stood from his nest, stretching out his weakened limbs before gently stepping over Frostfall's white form, curled in a tight ball and whimpering softly. He made sure to hold his tail high, feeling it brush against the top of the bush.

He crawled his way out of the prickly shrub and took a few steps to reach Rain's side. The tom had turned briefly to look at him, but now his blue eyes turned back to the forest. "I heard you crying in

your sleep," Rain meowed softly after the apprentice sat in the cold snow, drawing his thick tail around his paws to keep warm. "Another nightmare?"

"Yeah." He hadn't mentioned his dreams to his Clanmates, but they must've heard him crying out each night. He recalled all the times Shadefur and Stonecoat had brushed past him in the recent days, giving him brief licks or touches with their noses as if reminding him they were there.

"It's Acornstar, right? About what happened?"

Jaypaw swallowed, his throat becoming dry. "We almost *buried* her. When she *alive*."

Rain's tail flicked out to brush against his flank. "I know. It's an indescribable feeling, but you *must* remember that she woke long before we were finished. We cannot change the past, only our future."

Jaypaw stared at his paws for a while, unwilling to speak more about his dreams--he found they were easier to manage when he left them in his nest. He recalled back to that day, watching the blood flow from Acornstar's neck and belly, soaking the snow and spreading its red reach farther and farther.

"Sleekleg," Jaypaw murmured softly. "He was your father?"

He felt the defeat in Rain's body, saw the way his shoulders sunk low. "He was. I discovered the identity of my mother a few seasons after I became a warrior, and that of my father just a few moons before you met me--when he was chosen as the mate of Violetfrost. I couldn't stand the thought, so we ran. These cats we--*MothClan*--had captured spoke of the Clans, and we went for quite a while, following the Thunderpath but finding nothing. We found out she was expecting kits, and I had a nightmare of her and the kits dying during birth. So I left her, promised to return, and raced back to MothClan, hoping I could convince a medicine cat to come with me. But I was found, captured. By the time I escaped, Violetfrost was gone. You... know the rest."

Jaypaw could scarcely even imagine what Rain had gone through, living in MothClan, seeing all that violence, and being able to do nothing. "Why... Why didn't you leave earlier?"

Rain looked away. "It's not as easy to escape as you think. Cats have left before, but many of them are hunted down and found. They... It's not something I like to think about. When Violetfrost and I left, we didn't head for the Clans right away. We fled to the Twolegplace, found as many ways as we could to throw off our pursuers--almost ran into them a few times. It took a long time for us to become brave enough to actually start our journey to the Clans. Maybe if we had started a few days earlier, we would've found EchoClan, and Violetfrost would still be alive."

The tom's sad eyes turned down to Jaypaw, twisting with aching memories. "But she's gone, and I can't change that. All I can do now is get back to EchoClan and see my daughter, tell her stories of her mother so that she's never forgotten."

Jaypaw just gave a simple nod because he didn't have any words to say. He felt the icy winds deep in his bones, and at that moment he would give anything to be back in EchoClan with Ravenpaw by his side. Rain, as if sensing the apprentice's troubled thoughts, ran his tail along Jaypaw's spine.

For a while after, they sat in silence. Jaypaw found himself glad to have the cold forest around him, keeping him huddled in place, watching as soft snowflakes began to fall from the dark, star-scattered sky. *Are you there, StarClan?* Jaypaw wondered. *Can you see me from these stars? Can you see Ravenpaw?*

There was no answer, and Jaypaw wondered if he would ever see someone from StarClan--he knew Ravenpaw had before, so he didn't hesitate with his faith that StarClan was there; but he couldn't help but wondered if they cared, if any cat who had passed cared enough to watch him now.

The wind began to pick up, surprisingly warm for a moment before becoming freezing again, causing him to shiver. The snowfall started to get heavier, thicker flakes sticking to Jaypaw's fur and sinking into his skin, icy cold and wet. He shivered, watching

clouds of breath curl around his muzzle.

"Go back under the bush," Rain said softly. "Get warm."

"I don't want to sleep," Jaypaw murmured.

"Don't fear your dreams," Rain soothed, his mew softer than kit-fluff. "The darkest parts of your mind are desperate to break through, but you must focus on the light. In your dreams, ignore the bad, the words that are said, the actions that are caused--focus on memories, of moments that are pure and make you feel lighter than air."

"So... think of the good?" Jaypaw asked softly.

Rain's fluffy tail was warm around his flank. "Yes, Jaypaw, think of the good."

The apprentice hesitated for few more moments, but Rain continued to urge until he retreated back into the den and curled up by his brothers again. Stonecoat shifted at his cold touch but didn't wake, much to Jaypaw's relief. He curled himself into the dead bracken he was using for a nest, tucking his nose under his cold paws.

Think of the good, Jaypaw reminded himself. *Think of the good of being buried alive.*

But, to his relief, the next thing he knew, he was waking to a chilly dawn. It had snowed heavily last night, piling on the bush and weighing it down. Icy water dripped from the melting pileup, sending freezing spikes through Jaypaw's body each time once touched down on his coat and slipped through to his skin.

Shadefur and Stonecoat had left the den, their empty spaces filled with a cold breeze. Jaypaw struggled to his paws, feeling stiff and fragile, and shook his coat, trying to flood warmth through his body. Frostfall and Acornstar were both still sleeping, curled up as tightly as they could in their respective nests. He carefully stepped over them and left the cold den for an even colder forest.

Snow was falling quite heavy, instantly flecking his white pelt with fluffy flakes. Stonecoat sat not far off, hunched over with his fur

fluffed to keep himself warm, tail curled tightly over his paws. His back was layered with white powder. Jaypaw shook himself again and padded over to his brother, pressing into his side to share the tiny bit of warmth he got from sleep. Stonecoat was as cold as the snow covering the ground and accepted the heat gratefully.

"Where's Shadefur and Rain?" Jaypaw asked.

Stonecoat's tail tip twitched. "Out hunting," his voice was slightly raspy, sending out a cloud of cold into the air. "They've been gone since before dawn, so they should be back soon."

Jaypaw nodded and moved closer. He felt safe to decide that he *hated* leaf-bare. It was too cold, too dead, and he had lost so much since the snow fell. He remembered leaf-fall being pretty cold, too, though not quite as cold as the air around him currently; but only the faintest memory remained of the warmth of greenleaf, back when he was only three moons old.

"What's your favorite season?" Jaypaw asked his brother softly.

Stonecoat took a moment to answer. "Newleaf," he decided. "Watching the frost melt, seeing new growth come in--it's incredibly beautiful. Everything is so young and green, and after three moons of leaf-bare, the prey tastes so fresh, and the water isn't so cold it freezes your stomach. It shows life keeps going on."

"It sounds really beautiful," Jaypaw commented quietly, picturing the forest as Stonecoat described.

His brother's nose touched his forehead. "You were born in newleaf, you know. Near the end of it."

Jaypaw gave a small nod. "Snowfern said it took a whole day."

"It did," Stonecoat confirmed. "Shadefur, Boulderclaw, and I didn't leave camp the whole time. Right when you were born you let out this big cry, and Boulderclaw said he knew you'd be a great warrior one day."

Jaypaw thought he would've been glad to hear that, but a question took his mind and everything else faded away. "What about

Ravenpaw? What did you all think when he was born?"

Stonecoat was silent for a long time, almost too long. Then he said softly, "I thought he looked really small. But I knew he was strong." He let the words hang in the air for a moment, then gave a quiet snort and added, "Shadefur swore up and down Ravenpaw would be a medicine cat one day--said he could just tell. Guess he was right."

Jaypaw felt he didn't need to answer and instead just sat in silence with his brother, eyeing the snowy forest for signs of threats, looking up once and a while to watch the sun slide up the sky.

He saw Rain and Shadefur coming from far off, their gray pelts shadows against the empty white forest. Shadefur held a squirrel and thrush in his jaws, while Rain was dragging a large, black-feathered bird, its neck trapped in his jaws.

Jaypaw's heart settled in his throat as he watched the two get closer and closer. Stonecoat got up and shook himself free of snow, padding over to meet them. He touched Shadefur's muzzle with his nose then grabbed the legs of Rain's bird, helping him drag it across the snow.

They let it drop in front of Jaypaw. Its small, beady eye glared up at him. The apprentice swallowed drily, unable to take his eyes from it.

It took a moment but understanding eventually came to Rain's gaze. "It's a rook," he said softly. "Not a raven."

"Oh." Jaypaw's throat still felt dry, and pressure pushed even harder on his chest. The beady eye was still watching him, blank but never-ending in its questions. *Why did you leave him?* it seemed to be asking.

A soft pelt brushed along his fur as Shadefur pressed against him. Stonecoat appeared on his other side. "We'll go back," Shadefur promised, tail curling around Jaypaw. "Once Frostfall and Acornstar are home, we'll find Ravenpaw and bring him home safe."

"But what if it's too late?" His mind flickered to the worst, of

Ravenpaw getting free and trying to find them in the forest only to meet a patrol of MothClan warriors. Trying to force the image away instead sent Ravenpaw into Jaypaw's dream from earlier, the small, gentle apprentice running for his life from giant, shadowy cats only to be swallowed by the darkness.

"Jaypaw," Rain meowed softly. The apprentice slowly raised his eyes to meet Rain's. They were steady and determined. "You're forgetting something very important."

Jaypaw couldn't help the curiosity that built in his stomach.

"He may be young," Rain finally said, "but he's like no cat I've ever met. He's determined to be kind even when no other cat would be. Not to mention he's smart, smart enough to survive. Trust me on this, Jaypaw--MothClan is as likely to kill Ravenpaw as this rook is."

I hope you all enjoyed the first chapter back! Thank you for reading.

Chapter Thirteen

Blazepaw woke with a dry, cold throat, though his body felt warm. He blinked a few times, trying to clear his mind. His jaws opened in a yawn, taking in deep breaths of icy air, and he blearily checked on the three kits curled around him. Though they were nearing his size, each of his sisters still looked so small, their muscles not quite developed into the hardness apprentices and warriors had.

He sniffed Primkit's head from where she was curled against his stomach, and though her whiskers twitched she didn't wake. Meadowkit was stretched out, pressed to his back, while Fernkit was splayed over both Meadowkit and Blazepaw's flank.

A moment later, he realized what had woken him--Hazelfur stood at the entrance to the nursery, eyes soft as she watched him. "Yesterday, we were assigned a dawn hunting patrol," she reminded him softly. "Do you still want to come, or do you want to stay? I understand if you do."

Hunger clawed at his belly--if he was hungry, he knew his sisters would be, too. "I'll come," he told his mentor softly. "I'll be out in a few moments."

She nodded and retreated, giving a dip of her head to Rainsong, who had raised her head to watch the exchange. She had Hopekit and Flintkit curled up to her stomach. Blazepaw looked at his siblings, unsure how to leave without waking them. He quickly decided it was impossible to not at least wake one, so he leaned over and softly nudged Fernkit's cheek.

Her eyes slowly peeled open, blinking softly. "Hmm?" She blinked tiredly, pale yellow eyes dulled with sleep.

"I need to get up," he told her quietly, giving her cheek a lick. Her whiskers twitched, and, barely awake, she simply rolled until she slipped off of him. Meadowkit groaned softly, but her eyes stayed

closed. Blazepaw managed to slip out of the nest, and he nuzzled Fernkit's neck for a moment, taking in her sweet kit scent. Then he left the nursery, fluffing his coat to give him some protection from the cold.

Out in the clearing, Hazelfur was in conversation with Leafpelt, words soft between the two. Carppaw sat not far off, washing his brown coat. Blazepaw couldn't help but hesitate--he didn't know he would be patrolling with Carppaw. His chest ached with loneliness and the loss of his long-time friend.

After losing Emberheart, Rowanpaw had pushed away everyone--including the cats the two brothers had been raised with, Carppaw and Frondpaw. Rowanpaw had been harsh to them on many occasions, and though he knew his brother was in the wrong, Blazepaw had never spoken out in defense of his friends. Now, they wouldn't even look at him. It had been hard to sleep in the den, feeling the hostility in the air--mostly from Frondpaw--so it had been all too easy to move to the nursery with his younger sisters. It was also quite warmer.

Carppaw looked over as Blazepaw approached, green eyes narrowing. Blazepaw looked away.

"You ready?" Hazelfur asked, fluffing her light brown fur against the cold leaf-bare air.

"Yeah." Blazepaw's throat felt dry. Hazelfur nodded, then dipped her head to Leafpelt as an offer for the older warrior to take control. The black she-cat lead the way up the rocky pathway, bushy black fur slick from a fresh wash, though her paws were still tinted brown--after moons of trudging through the deep mud of their territory, every cat in the Clan had mud staining their lower legs, as cleaning them was pretty much useless.

Brackenfoot was sitting at the camp entrance, staring out at their territory. Normally, they would only have a guard at night, but with so many kits in the Clan and foxes having entered their territory, a cat would be there during the day, too. Thinking of the foxes made Blazepaw's shoulder burn--his injuries had mostly healed, but the scarring still pulled at his skin when he moved his shoulder wrong.

"Good luck," Brackenfoot meowed to the patrol, nodding briefly to the cats. His eyes fell on Carppaw as he pulled himself up after Blazepaw. "Carppaw," the senior warrior said, "could we talk privately for a moment?"

Blazepaw was surprised by the hesitancy in the warrior's voice--and was that fear in his eyes?

Leafpelt looked at her apprentice, giving a soft nod to say she was okay with it.

But Carppaw lashed his tail, turned his head pointedly away from the dark brown warrior, and growled, "no." Then he bunched his muscles and leaped from camp. He landed heavily in the snow and stomped off, not waiting for the patrol.

Leafpelt gave a soft sigh and flicked her tail reassuringly over Brackenfoot's shoulders. "Maybe another time, okay? He's still grieving."

Brackenfoot snorted, shifting away from Leafpelt's touch. "I know that," he growled, looking uncomfortable and hostile. Leafpelt shook her head at the older warrior then followed Carppaw from the camp, obviously disappointed.

Blazepaw waited for Hazelfur to land before heading after. *I wonder what that was about...* He knew he was in no position to ask, so he kept his jaws shut.

Leafpelt took the lead toward SageClan's moorland, Carppaw following by her side in silence. His fur was prickling, and his head was as low as his shoulders. It seemed the tense exchange was something both Leafpelt and Hazelfur understood because neither asked the apprentice about it--in fact, they didn't say anything at all. The entire journey to the Old Thunderpath was taken in awkward silence.

Not to say that once they crossed, they started a conversation--they stayed quiet, but at least this time they had a purpose. Blazepaw kept his ears perked, straining to overhear prey scuffling through the snow or brushing through the thin, frosted undergrowth. But so

far, the woodland seemed silent.

"This is a good chance to work on your solo hunting," Leafpelt told the apprentices in a soft voice as to not stir the wind and warn possible prey. "Head off in different directions to not mess with each other's hunts--Hazelfur and I will go hunt the far territory for a bit then come back and find you. Do your best and try to do it alone but help each other if you get the chance. Every piece of prey is needed, no matter how it's caught."

Blazepaw gave a silent nod. Without hesitation, Carppaw turned and slunk off, tail still twitching in annoyance. For a moment, Blazepaw was tempted to ask the warriors in front of him about the situation with Brackenfoot, but he quickly decided not too--if he wanted to know, he would need to ask Carppaw himself.

Once Hazelfur and Leafpelt had made some distance, Blazepaw set off in the opposite direction of Carppaw, deciding both of them needed at least a little time alone. The CrowClan and SageClan territories were separated by an old Twoleg path, and Blazepaw knew Carppaw would be heading that way.

The apprentice kept his ears perked, but his mind continued to wander despite him trying his best to ignore his distracting thoughts. Blazepaw began to think of different ways to apologize to Carppaw. He had a feeling Carppaw wouldn't accept an apology right away, and if he insisted too much he would most definitely push his friend further away--but if he gave up too easily, he wouldn't seem sincere.

Unable to help himself, Blazepaw let out a heavy sigh, lashing his tail. He heard the swift flurry of tiny, fleeing pawsteps. He groaned, throwing his head back and closing his eyes, wishing he could shut off the world for a little while. *Mouse brain,* he cursed himself for not focusing. He shook his head in attempt to clear it, but it didn't do much.

He sighed again, remembering what his first mentor, Heronclaw, used to tell him, *"To be a warrior is to give everything you have to your Clan--but sometimes, your mind doesn't understand that, so you must remember to pay attention to your own needs, as well. You have to find*

the perfect balance of protecting yourself and *your Clan. Don't focus too much on one, and make sure not to ignore the other."*

Guilt built in Blazepaw's stomach. Since Rowanpaw had left, he had been focusing on his Clan, trying to make up for his brother not being here anymore. Seeing Carppaw slowly breaking down reminded him he needed the balance Heronclaw had mastered. Blazepaw decided now was the time to focus on himself for a while--and that started with making up with Carppaw and Frondpaw.

He spun on his paws and followed his trail back to where he had split up with Hazelfur, Leafpelt, and Carppaw. He found his old friend's pawsteps leading off and started after them. He tried to form a coherent idea of what he would say, but each time the words faded quick. Eventually, he decided to wing it--which might've not been the best idea, but anxiety was quickly building in his chest and forcing his mind blank was the only thing that would work.

"*Go away!*"

Blazepaw stumbled in surprise as he heard Carppaw's harsh voice. For a moment he was frozen, then he shook his head and slunk forward, having a feeling he was approaching something he shouldn't. But he didn't want to turn away, not until he spoke to Carppaw. He slunk behind a tree, peering around the trunk.

Carppaw stood, fur on end and body rigid, facing a larger cat--an almost-black tom with a pained, desperate expression.

"Please," Brackenfoot said softly. "Carppaw, just let me explain. We've... We've never really gotten a chance to talk."

"I wonder why!" Carppaw lashed his tail, his chest heaving harshly as he tried to control his breathing. "You had plenty of time!"

Brackenfoot flinched as if he had been struck. "I... I know... I was... I was scared." Brackenfoot sounded like a scolded apprentice, his ears flat and his shoulders hunched.

"Scared?" Carppaw let out a brief, disbelieving breath as if he was

too shocked to even think. "*You* were scared? What about Bloomcloud? You abandoned her!"

"I know!" Brackenfoot's voice raised for a moment, but it quickly broke. "I..." He took a deep breath, blinking his eyes as if it was clearing his head. "I wasn't ready to be a father..."

Blazepaw's stomach clenched in shock, and he stared at the two cats in surprise, sinking lower into the snow. Brackenfoot was Carppaw's *father?* He would've never guessed! He was raised with Carppaw, and not once did any cat mention Bloomcloud's mate--Blazepaw had figured he had died.

"Bloomcloud wasn't ready to be a mother, either," Carppaw hissed, his voice full of pain and his eyes twisting with rejection. "But she didn't get a choice. She struggled to raise us, to keep us safe, while she watched you take Ashbreeze as a mate, pretending the three of us didn't exist--we were barely apprentices when you announced Ashbreeze was having kits! As if you couldn't wait to forget us..."

Brackenfoot seemed to sink into himself, his face twisted with an unbearable pain. Blazepaw recognized the look because he had seen it many times before, reflected from Rowanpaw's eyes--it was hate. Hate of himself, of who he was.

"I don't know why I did it," Brackenfoot whispered. "But..." The tom let out a shaky breath before managing to stand just a little taller, forcing his voice to be strong. "I *never* stopped loving Bloomcloud, nor you or your sister. The moment you were born I wanted to come back--"

Carppaw growled to cut him off. "Then why didn't you? How come I didn't even know you were my father until *after* my mother died?"

Brackenfoot lowered his gaze. "Bloomcloud, she..." his voice trailed off. Blazepaw caught a tiny twitch of the tom's tail tip. "I hurt her, a lot. I figured she would do better without me--that you would do better not knowing I was your father..."

"But then she died," Carppaw hissed, eyes harsh with agonized anger. "And you decided, 'oh, hey, my old mate is lying dead in the

clearing, I should go over to the son I've never even talked to and apologize for not being there!'"

Brackenfoot flinched. "I wasn't thinking right!" he tried to explain desperately. "Seeing her dead, it destroyed me, and all I wanted to do was comfort you! You looked so... so broken. I know it was wrong, to tell you something like that at such a bad time..."

"Of course it was wrong!" Carppaw's mew shattered. "I was struggling and you made it worse! You ruined my entire life! I would've been happy going on thinking my father was dead instead of a monster who just didn't care enough!"

The senior warrior dropped his head, seemingly out of energy. "I'm sorry," he whispered simply. "It was wrong, and I'm sorry..."

Without another word, the old tom turned and slunk away.

Blazepaw stared in shock. *No!* He wanted to cry. *Come back, talk to him!* Carppaw was quivering, as if his legs no longer had the strength to hold him. And Brackenfoot was abandoning him again!

Carppaw stared after his retreating father, lashing his tail. Once the warrior had disappeared, the apprentice called out, "you can come out now, Blazepaw. I know you're there!"

Blazepaw sunk into the snow for a moment, ears flattening. His chest burned and his throat felt dry when he finally forced himself out from behind the tree. Carppaw's eyes were hard as they fell on him.

"Having fun listening to something that doesn't involve you?" he growled. His eyes shined with a pain so similar to how Rowanpaw's always did that Blazepaw felt even worse.

"I'm sorry..." Blazepaw didn't even know what else to say.

Carppaw looked away. "Everyone always is." The apprentice shook himself like he was trying to rid himself of the exchange with his father. "Well, were you just here to spy or did you want to say something?"

Blazepaw swallowed drily. "Carppaw... I'm sorry, I know what it's like to have--"

"To have a father who doesn't care about you?" Carppaw finished. "Yeah, I guess we're both unlucky in that regard."

Blazepaw was surprised by the words. They were still cold, but it almost sounded like... a truce? "I... When Rowanpaw pushed you and Frondpaw away, I'm sorry that I did, too. Everything he said and did was wrong and cruel, but... I couldn't let him suffer alone. I couldn't turn against my brother."

"Couldn't turn against your brother?" Carppaw sounded breathlessly disbelieving. "Yet you turned against me?"

Blazepaw's ears perked in surprise, but Carppaw's eyes were as cold as ever--no, not cold. Hurt. A storm of pain was twisting through his injured gaze.

"Bloomcloud raised you in our nest," Carppaw croaked. "She told us the same stories, taught us the same lessons..." His mew rose harshly, dry and cracked. "I thought *we* were brothers!"

"I..."

"Frondpaw and I always tried to make you feel included," Carppaw murmured, turning his eyes away. "But you two... you liked to think you were fighting the world alone. Ratpaw changed his name and didn't tell us--if he had, we would've helped you guys. We would've taken your side. But... you treated us like we were nothing." Finally, he looked back at Blazepaw, eyes glazed over. "Did you even ever care about us? About Bloomcloud?"

Blazepaw struggled to get out any sound. "I..." his mew broke, but he forced himself to swallow. "Bloomcloud was more my mother than any other cat. And yes, Carppaw, you were--*are*--my brother. I'm sorry I never showed it more."

Carppaw stared at him for a long time. Blazepaw thought ants were crawling through his pelt, but he didn't dare move, not even a twitch of his tail or ears.

Then Carppaw looked away. "Whatever. Just leave me alone, Blazepaw."

And when the older apprentice stalked away, Blazepaw just stared. *Heronclaw, what am I supposed to do now? How can I help my Clan when everything in my life is destroyed?*

As usual, he received no answer.

By the time they returned to camp, Blazepaw's tail was dragging through the snow, his fur feeling hot despite the cold air. In the end, only Leafpelt had managed to catch something, a sparrow she snagged from the air after Blazepaw tripped over his own paw while stalking it.

Hazelfur cast a glance back at him as she reached the ground of the camp, a gleam of sympathy in her yellow eyes. Blazepaw turned his gaze away as he fell still next to her, trying to avoid the fact that he could see Leafpelt padding past toward the nursery with the small bird clamped in her jaws.

Juniperfur, resting in front of the medicine cat's den, followed Leafpelt with a hungry gaze, then glanced away guiltily.

Hazelfur's tail brushed along Blazepaw's back, and he dully flicked an ear to acknowledge her. "Are you feeling okay? You were lost in your head the entire hunt."

Blazepaw gave a soft shrug, unwilling to speak. He watched Leafpelt disappear into the nursery with the feeling of a rock in his chest. His attempt to focus on himself and his relationships had driven him even farther from Carppaw, and not only that, but it also ruined a hunt. He had wasted his energy on making himself feel better and ignored the fact that there were hungry cats staking their lives on his performance.

"I want to go back out," he murmured, scratching his claws over the stone ground.

"We will," Hazelfur responded softly. "But we need to rest first. No

point in going out now and not having the strength to finish a hunt."

But Blazepaw knew he didn't just want to sit around--he was tired, hungry, and sore, but he knew the rest of his Clan would be, too. "I *should* go back out," he said, keeping his eyes away from Hazelfur's.

She ran her tail down his spine again. "I know how it feels, but you need to save your strength to hunt later today--let yourself get too weak, you get whitecough. We're lucky enough it didn't spread when Juniperfur got sick, we can't risk it." When he didn't respond, she nudged his cheek. "Go rest with your sisters, it'll all be okay."

But as Blazepaw forced his paws toward the back of camp, he felt as if life was the farthest from being okay, and he wasn't sure if it ever would be.

I want to apologize for such slow uploads, my life has gotten pretty busy and Clouded Skies has taken a small step back in priorities. I still love the story and I have so much of the future fleshed out, I *need* to write it until I finish the story I know. Hopefully I do manage to speed up, though, because the story I have planned out will take actual *years* to finish at this rate. I won't stop writing it, though, no matter how long it takes. I will be honest, I have been trying to think of a way to transfer Clouded Skies to a story type that isn't a fanfiction of Warriors. Future thoughts, though, future thoughts. For now, enjoy the story!

Chapter Fourteen

Shadows twisted through Ravenpaw's vision. He stood in the EchoClan camp clearing, struggling to stand because of the harsh, wild winds coming at him from every direction, screaming in his ears to block all other sound. He stood in snow that went more than halfway up his legs, obstructing his attempts to move even a single pawstep.

He tried to search the clearing, hoping beyond hope to see a familiar face, but the white clouds of a swirling snowstorm hid everything. "Snowfern!" he cried, his voice whipped away by the fierce winds. "Boulderclaw! Help me!"

White washed his vision for a moment, hiding even his whiskers, then it cleared just enough for him to see the figure in front of him. A gray tom stood firm, fur ruffled and edged with ice. His whiskers were broken and drooped.

"Why?" his quiet, dry voice broke perfectly through the wind, barely more than a whisper. "Why did you leave us?"

"M... Mossrain..." Ravenpaw stared desperately at his mentor. "I didn't want to!" he cried out, voice breaking. "I want to come home!"

"Then why didn't you ever return?" Mossrain whispered. "We all waited for you, begged to see you again."

"I'll come back, I swear!" Ravenpaw promised. "I'll come home!"

"There's nothing left," Mossrain growled, his voice harsher than the cold. "You left us all to die. We're all dead *because of you!" He leaped, claws flashing in the white snow. He tackled Ravenpaw, the apprentice's back hit the snow--*

Ravenpaw awoke in his nest. He was shivering, struggling to catch his breath. His bones felt like they were made of ice, fragile and freezing.

"Ravenpaw?" Newt sat next to him, head tilted.

Ravenpaw tried to ground himself before answering. He was in Hail's den, a small area under a pile of rocks by a thin stream. Yesterday, he and Newt had traveled across the forest to visit the abandoned Twoleg den, but there was nothing there but a destroyed "shed", as Newt called it. The tree the patrol had sheltered in was empty, too, the snow undisturbed by pawsteps.

Ravenpaw's family was gone. He was alone.

His dream slipped back into his mind, making him shiver. He curled deeper into the nest Newt had helped him make, crafted out of dry ferns and dead bracken. It crunched uncomfortably under him.

"You okay?" Newt asked.

"No," Ravenpaw admitted softly. "I... I had a nightmare, of home."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Newt asked quietly. Ravenpaw considered it, but then he shook his head. Newt nodded in understanding. "They're difficult to live with," the young loner said softly. "They take your mind, make you question everything. Trying to ignore or forget them makes it worse, so instead, you own them. Take what they told you and figure out why you had them and what they mean--just don't let it control you."

Ravenpaw stared. "I understand." But he didn't. What Newt said made sense--a little, at least--but Ravenpaw was so surprised to hear it from someone so young, it was harder to process. What had Newt seen in his life to make him realize something most grown cats don't?

Newt's tail flicked his shoulder. "Come on, the best thing to do is to get moving, keep your mind thinking. You can't drown in your thoughts, not yet."

Ravenpaw hesitated for a moment, flexing his paws. Then he forced himself up, shivering as his bones creaked like an ancient elder's. He followed Newt out of the small opening between some rocks, slipping into the bright sunlight, blinking uncomfortably as it

burned his eyes. The bare forest stretched out, pure white from the snow.

The ice over the stream had already been broken and tasted colder than the soft winds that twisted through his fur. It settled heavy in Ravenpaw's stomach, chilling his core. "Where's Hail?" he asked, checking around the area for the elderly tom.

"Hail has some friends around the Tallwalker dens," Newt explained, taking his turn to drink in between speaking. "He's gone to speak to a few, see if they've seen your family."

"He didn't have to do that," Ravenpaw said quickly. At Hail's age, he shouldn't be wandering so much--he should be able to rest after such a long life. And he was only doing it for Ravenpaw.

"It's fine," Newt said, looking amused, like he knew what Ravenpaw was thinking. "When Hail puts his mind to something, he's going to do it. Besides, he likes to check on everyone he knows."

Ravenpaw gave a small nod, having learned already it was hard to argue with Newt--the young tom liked to have the last word. In the silence that grew, Ravenpaw's mind started to flicker back to his dream, and he hated the thoughts that grew. "What do you normally do every day?" Ravenpaw asked to distract himself.

"Hunt or practice," Newt answered. "I like learning to climb through the trees--good for running away or chasing someone." His eyes glowed mischievously. "Want to join me?"

"I don't really climb trees," Ravenpaw admitted. "Other cats in my Clan do--all of them, actually. But as a medicine cat, I don't really leave the camp unless it's going to gather herbs."

"And there aren't any herbs in the trees."

Newt's gaze was so serious, Ravenpaw couldn't think of what to say. Then the young tom chuckled, seemingly enjoying his speechlessness. "*Anyway*," he drew out the word playfully. "Why don't we wander around, look for herbs and prey? You can explain whatever herbs we find, and we'll share what I catch."

Ravenpaw couldn't help but watch the tom for a moment. "Sure," he said finally. There was something about Newt that Ravenpaw didn't quite understand--he liked the tom, that was for sure. He had a warm energy, but there was a distant look in his eyes, hidden under the outward emotion, like a part of his mind was somewhere else even when he seemed to be focused on the conversation.

Newt led the way deeper into the snowy forest, ears perked and eyes swerving around in search. He walked with such expert silence that Ravenpaw felt like a badger stumbling along, each crunch under his paw echoing through the quiet air.

Newt's meow was like a soft wind. "I've been wondering, why don't you hunt?" His tone was polite, kindly curious with no judgement. "You mentioned it before, but you never explained it."

"Oh." Ravenpaw tripped and stumbled along to catch up with Newt, who hadn't seemed to notice. His eyes and ears were still scanning the forest. "I guess it just never felt right, even just imagining it. Even if it's just prey, you're still taking a life."

"But you eat it, right?" Newt pointed out. "It doesn't bother you that you knew someone else killed it?"

"I-I guess not," Ravenpaw answered hesitantly. "I just... I just don't want to be the one killing it directly. I don't like thinking of the blood."

"I can understand that," Newt meowed, bobbing his head a few times. "What about cat blood, though? Don't you have to deal with that on the regular with your healing or whatever?"

"That feels different," Ravenpaw admitted. It felt nice talking to someone again, a normal conversation. It almost felt like he was back in EchoClan. "Blood has never really bothered me--I guess I misspoke before. With prey, it's not the blood, but the act of hurting, using my claws and personally drawing the blood. But seeing wounds, it's never bothered me. All I think is that I should help. I don't see any reason to fight, to hurt others, but I know others do. So after, when wounds are bleeding, I'll help whoever needs it, no matter who they are. Whatever a cat's done, they don't

deserve to die because they didn't receive help. They should get to survive and learn that someone believes they can do better--I think, most of the time, that's what some cats really need. Just someone to believe in them."

His mind drifted to Brookstar. The ancient EchoClan leader had killed so many and twisted so many minds. Perhaps, when she was alive, if someone had been there to show her a better path, to tell her that they truly believed she could be a better cat, maybe things would be different. Maybe Blossompaw wouldn't be suffering like she was now if Ravenpaw had helped her earlier in life.

Newt was quiet for a little while, then he finally meowed, "that makes you more honorable than most, and braver. I've met cats who think every problem can be solved with their claws, who act fearless to hide their secrets and weaknesses. Maybe, if they met someone like you, they would see a different side to life." Then Newt shot him a mischievous glance. "Or, maybe, you're just naïve, and refusing to hurt anyone will be your end. Either way, it's your choice."

Ravenpaw blinked at the young tom, his throat dry. "I... I don't care. If I die because I refuse to fight, at least I die doing what I believed to be right."

Newt watched him for a long time, almost too long. Then his tail curled upward and he let out a purr. "I like you!" he decided brightly. "You have heart, more than most. Come on, I want to learn whatever you can teach me."

He padded off with a bounce.

Ravenpaw didn't know what to feel after that conversation. It confused him, how quick Newt could change his emotions, and he couldn't help but be jealous of it--he was so happy, it almost didn't seem fair.

"You coming?" Newt didn't look back, his gaze having returned to the snowy forest. Ravenpaw stared after him, feeling more unsteady then ever. Newt was truly the strangest cat he had ever met, and he didn't quite understand why he thought that way. The young tom

talked about learning from Ravenpaw, but the apprentice had a feeling he could learn a lot from Newt, too.

A strange feeling touched Ravenpaw's chest, making him feel lighter than he had felt for a very long time. The worry for his family and his Clan faded slightly, letting him release a hidden breath he didn't know he had been holding. The cold air filled his body, feeling fresher and stronger than he remembered it being. On paws so light they barely disturbed the snow, Ravenpaw went after Newt, farther from the direction he knew led to home.

For a while, they traveled in silence. Newt bounded from bush to bush, sniffing the frosted fronds and nosing his way under a few times. His ears swiveled back and forth, flicking at every sound. Then he paused, every muscle going completely still. Ravenpaw froze, anxiety rushing into every bone. He waited, watching Newt's stance.

The tom slowly lowered himself down, belly fur softly brushing against the snow. He crept forward, one slow step at a time. Then, quick as a flash, he leaped, paws scouring the snow and throwing up a pile of slush. He landed in the long, drooping leaves of a fern bush. There was a high-pitched squeal, then Newt's head emerged, a mouse in his jaws.

It cried out in fear, Ravenpaw realized, unable to stop a shiver through his thin coat.

Newt set the mouse down not far from Ravenpaw. His eyes were sympathetic. "It died so we can live," he told Ravenpaw softly. "We won't take its life for granted."

Ravenpaw gave a small nod, deciding to watch his paws. "In the Clans, warrior apprentices are taught to give thanks to StarClan for every catch," he mewed.

Newt's eyes flashed, and he looked down, hesitating with his words. "I... I give thanks to my mother. I like to think she's watching."

Ravenpaw's tail twitched. "I'm sure she is," he offered sincerely.

Newt was quiet for a moment, then raised his head, a light glowing in his eyes--almost too bright. "Then she's probably seen me trip over my own paws one too many times!" He nudged the mouse toward Ravenpaw with a paw. "Do you want to eat first, or whatever I catch next?"

"Shouldn't we feed Hail first?" Ravenpaw asked instinctively.

Newt's eyes glowed with amusement. "It's not like he's helpless--obviously we'll bring back whatever we don't eat, but Hail's a better hunter than pretty much any cat I've ever met. Besides, we'll be out here for a while, and we don't want this getting cold."

"Oh." The idea of eating before an elder, even one who still hunted, unsettled Ravenpaw. Taking care of elders was what made a Clan a Clan. *But I'm not in the Clan right now, am I?* "Uh, you can have it."

Newt shrugged. "I'll catch you something else, then." He devoured the mouse in a few quick bites. Ravenpaw's stomach grumbled, but he pushed the feeling down and followed Newt when he padded away, though they had barely started on again when he spotted a small plant hidden by the snow, sprouts of leaves coming from one spot, spreading out and drooping from the coating of white powder.

He padded over and nosed the stems, shaking off the snow that covered them. He heard Newt's soft steps approaching, and the pale ginger tom sniffed the long, jagged leaves. "What is it?" he queried. "It doesn't look all that special."

Ravenpaw took a deep breath of the plant, trying to get past the dying mushy smell that coated the leaves. A soft but sharp tang touched his scent glands, confirming his thoughts. "It's called dock," he explained. "Pretty useful, actually. You chew the leaves and apply them to wounds to soothe pain. Mossrain, my mentor, sometimes mixes it into poultices, but we don't have much right now, not with the frost killing everything."

Newt nudged the dead stems as he took a deep breath, obviously trying to learn whatever he could. "Interesting," was all he said.

Ravenpaw's tail twitched. He hoped he wasn't annoying Newt, explaining so much like he was a kit on its first venture outside the nursery.

Then the tom asked, "what does Mossrain normally pair it with? Like, what herbs do best healing wounds?"

"Oh, we, uh--goldenrod is best for healing wounds, but Mossrain likes to use marigold in the mixture because it helps heal a bit and helps stop infections. And dock when we can, as I said." He fell quiet, wondering if there was an easier way to explain the herbs without tumbling along as Mossrain does. He didn't want to annoy Newt or overload him. *Don't treat him like a kit,* Ravenpaw tried to tell himself. *He's older than you and could probably handle a lot more than you can.*

Then Ravenpaw caught Newt's eyes. They were filled with memories of lost times, of happy moments long left in the past. Then a protective cover flashed over his gaze, an excitement that no longer seemed natural or wanted. He stood up with an energetic bounce, tail rising high. "Let's keep going," he said, his voice warm but a little dry.

The loner spun on his paws and padded away, tail waving. It took Ravenpaw a moment to follow, his head spinning in thought. It was getting easier to read Newt, and Ravenpaw wasn't sure how much he liked it--the brief breaks in happiness now seemed like breaks in his mask, instead. He was realizing that despite Newt always holding steady conversation, he knew very, very little about the tom.

"Hey, Newt?" Ravenpaw mewed softly.

"Hmm?" The tom looked back briefly but kept walking, ears still perked for nearby prey.

"I was wondering, how long have you known Hail?" He felt like it was a safe question to ask--he didn't want to bring up bad memories when Newt already obviously struggled with them.

"He's a family friend," Newt answered after a moment. "So, you

mentioned someone, Mossrain? Your mentor?"

"Yeah," he meowed back, knowing Newt was trying to change the subject and deciding to go with it. "He's still pretty young, but he knows so much. I don't think I could ever learn it all--the thought of doing it all alone, healing a Clan? It terrifies me."

"It sounds like he'll be around for a long time, though," Newt pointed out.

"A lot can happen," Ravenpaw murmured, his dream trying to resurface; he did his best to push it back down.

"What's he like?" Newt asked, helping him pull his trailing thoughts together.

"Talkative." It was the first word to come to mind. "But funny, and thoughtful. He's best friends with my older brother, too."

"So you're not your parents' first litter?" Newt asked.

Ravenpaw saw his chance and hoped it wouldn't come back to bite him. "No, Stonecoat and Shadefur are older. I have three littermates, Jaypaw, Blossompaw, and Willowpaw. What about you?"

Newt suddenly stopped, raising his tail for silence. He crept forward on silent paws to a clump of snow-covered bushes. Ravenpaw found himself holding his breath, watching Newt hunt like a silent breeze. The tom reached the bushes and nosed through some bracken. His tail twitched, then his shoulders dropped.

He stood up, turning to Ravenpaw with a shrug. "False alarm," he meowed. "Nothing there." He continued on with a bouncing step. "So, tell me about your parents."

Ravenpaw couldn't stop a dejected feeling from growing in his chest--he knew well enough Newt had avoided the subject of his own family by going off to check the bracken. *He barely knows you--obviously, he doesn't want to share about himself.*

"Their names are Snowfern and Boulderclaw," he meowed finally,

hoping that being open himself would help Newt see there wasn't anything to fear. "Snowfern is actually from a different Clan originally, but she came to EchoClan to be with Boulderclaw."

Newt didn't answer immediately. When he did, his mew was very quiet, his eyes downcast as he muttered, "she must've loved him a lot." Then he violently shook himself and hurried along, tail waving. "Let's keep looking for herbs! I'm sure there's more around here!"

Ravenpaw decided that he didn't want to force Newt into being uncomfortable, and for the rest of the adventure, he didn't ask Newt any questions. The young tom stayed happy and full of energy, bouncing from place to place like he had flames under his paws. But a few times, Ravenpaw caught a glimpse of Newt's gaze, and in those fleeting moments, Newt looked like he wanted to do anything other than run and play.

But yet he did. The entire time they explored, searching for prey and herbs, he stayed happy, made jokes, asked questions about Ravenpaw's life. Very occasionally did he speak about himself, and when they were nearing Hail's den, Ravenpaw tried to put all that Newt said about himself together, but it was nearly nothing, just soft impressions he wasn't even sure were real.

When they arrived at the river's edge, Newt dropped the squirrel he had recently caught while Ravenpaw emptied his jaws of a stick holding juniper berries and a rolled pile of ragwort leaves.

"Hail, you here?" Newt asked. Ravenpaw sniffed the air and detected the elder's scent inside his den a moment before he slipped out from underneath the piled rocks. Instantly, Ravenpaw could see he was in pain--his limp was slight, but his shoulders were low and tensed.

"Welcome back, how did you two get on?" Hail asked. His mew sounded dry.

"I found herbs that should help with your pain," Ravenpaw meowed, nudging the herbs he had set in the snow.

Hail nodded his thanks while Newt asked the old tom, "what about

you? Find any cat who saw something?"

"There's a possibility," Hail answered slowly, and Ravenpaw's heart leapt into his throat. Hail turned a sympathetic glance on him. "It's a slight one, though. It comes from a cat named Benny."

Newt interrupted with a snort of surprise. "Benny?" he exclaimed. "He can't tell a bird's shadow from his own!"

Hail sighed, nodding his head. "Normally, I would agree with you. I trust Benny's word as much as I trust a crow to watch my prey, but he mentioned the cat he heard the news from was Cara."

Newt's ears twitched in interest. "In what situation would they ever meet?"

Hail shrugged. "You know Benny, he loses focus faster than the wind changes direction, so the conversation never got that far. But, I think it's worth checking on."

"What did he say?" Ravenpaw asked. "About what Cara said?"

"Well, he was brief and not very straight forward, but from what I could gather, a friend of Cara's met some cats looking for someone. He didn't say much else, so I want to go to Cara directly and get it from her. I was thinking of going tomorrow."

Newt sat straighter, looking alarmed and worried. "Cara lives quite far, Hail. And last time you went that far without me, you got caught. I don't want to do another rescue this soon."

Hail snorted, soft amusement in his eyes. "I think I'll be okay," he said.

Newt's tail twitched. "Why don't I go instead? I know the way," he added.

Hail was shaking his head before Newt had even finished. "I have a different plan for you. I want you and Ravenpaw to head to the Garden and ask around there."

Understanding touched Newt's gaze, and he looked to his paws.

"Okay, I guess that makes sense."

Hail's gaze twinkled knowingly, while Ravenpaw looked between them. "What's the Garden?" he asked the elder.

"It's a den in the Twolegplace," Hail explained. "Lots of cats travel through. If any cat saw your family, Felix and Sawyer will know."

Chapter Fifteen

"Okay, now flex out your claws--get your leg all stretched."

Willowpaw winced as she curled her claws into the air, pulling the muscles of her front leg. A sharp flare came from the small bite wound marking her thin white fur. "It still hurts," she admitted, keeping her leg tense and trying to fight the persisting sting.

Mossrain tilted his head curiously, running his delicate paw along her leg. "It seems mostly healed, so the pain should be light. Go ahead and relax, I'll make a poultice and see if it helps the pain. Any other of your wounds bothering you?"

"My neck still hurts a little," she admitted. Mossrain leaned over her, carefully pulling back the cobwebs with his small claws.

"The bite was messy, and it's in a bad spot, so I'm not too surprised the healing is slow. I'll get a poultice for that, too. Just try not to move your head around too much and you should be fine."

Willowpaw thanked Mossrain as he headed off, his response a simple tail flick over her ear. She shifted in her moss, thankful that though she had many different bites and scratches over her coat, most no longer bothered her, despite only three days having passed since the battle with the stoats. It was the one good thing about stoats--though they fought fast and inflicted a lot of wounds, they were all shallow and small, easily healed as long as they were cleaned.

"Mossrain, would you come look at Brightflower when you have the chance? I think the wound on her chest is bleeding again."

The pretty tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat paused the licking of her shoulder, turning her exasperated gaze to her littermate with a sigh. "Petaldust, I'm *fine.* Wounds bleed, it happens."

"I just want to be sure," Petaldust argued, shifting in the nest he had

pulled up next to Brightflower's. "Your wounds are some of the worst."

Willowpaw couldn't help but agree with her friend, and silently acknowledged Brightflower seemed to have bad luck when it came to battles--even in the fight against SageClan, honorable warriors who didn't fight to kill, she had gained a long, deep wound down her side that even now, over a moon later, was still slightly visible under her tortoiseshell fur.

"Let me check Willowpaw then I'll come over--I need to check everyone again anyways." Mossrain pulled together a few herbs and gathered them in his jaws, padding back to Willowpaw while chewing awkwardly, bits of leaves falling from the sides of his mouth. He sat down and after a few moments, he raised one paw and spat the chewed pulp out. Then he licked small amounts from the pile and applied it to her wound on her leg with the tip of his tongue.

The poultice didn't sting on her leg, but it did on her neck. Only after he had finished and grabbed cobwebs did Mossrain decide to explain as he covered her injuries. "With the wounds closing the juices don't enter as well, but hopefully they'll help enough. Here, eat this." He displayed a tiny seed on his pad, and after a moment hesitation Willowpaw leaned forward and took it. "It'll help block the pain for now, though you might become a little sleepy."

Willowpaw tried to clean her fur when Mossrain headed away to Brightflower, but when it pulled on her neck and sent a small flare of pain out, she sighed and rested her head on the edge of her nest. Her eyes found Snowfern, settled in a large nest with Lark and Pine curled up in front of her. They slept soundly despite their wounds, with the black and white warrior cleaning Lark's light tabby fur.

Jealousy searched Willowpaw's heart, but she couldn't take her eyes off the scene. She knew Lark and Pine had been through a lot, going through such a violent battle after being in the Clan for barely half a moon, but continuously seeing her mother treat them like her own sent a tightness into her chest. *They need it, you don't.* She didn't need her mother to smother her, she just needed to continue to train and ignore the rejection steadily growing in her heart.

"Stop pushing me!"

Willowpaw turned her head to the den entrance at the sound of the harsh voice. After a moment two brown tabbies entered the den--Thorntail was first, fur ruffled and a growl in his throat as Oakcloud blocked the escape he obviously wanted to disappear through.

"Mossrain, Thorntail opened his wound on patrol, would you come look at it?" Oakcloud called. Thorntail let out a soft hiss.

"I'm *fine*," the young warrior growled, then turned his head away, looking at the ground, and mumbled, "not that you actually care."

Mossrain's tail flicked and he didn't look up from where he was checking Brightflower's stomach. "Thorntail, get in a nest, I'll come by in a few minutes."

The grumpy tom hesitated, but when Oakcloud nudged him, he gave a hiss and limped across the den, sitting down in an empty nest while stretching out his injured back leg. "I'll come by later," Oakcloud meowed to his son.

Thorntail flicked an ear. "Don't bother."

Obvious disappointment touched Oakcloud's eyes, and he seemed unwilling to leave the den, staring at his son with a pleading look.

A small white and silver shape stomped into the den, frustration radiating from her lithe frame. Pieces of moss stuck out from her claws. "You said we were going out once I finished cleaning the apprentices' den! Well, it's been clean for *ages*."

"I was out on patrol, you know that." Oakcloud cast a glance at Blossompaw, his eyes switching from pained to complete calm in a heartbeat. "Did you clean the nursery as well?"

"Maskdapple was sleeping, and Goldenpool wouldn't get out of her stupid nest. Dappletail said to just leave." Blossompaw uncaringly flicked her tail, ears flattened back. "So, can we get going? Don't tell me I have to wait longer!"

Oakcloud's eyes narrowed. "Is Goldenpool all right?" he asked.

Blossompaw groaned. "Why should I know?"

The brown warrior scuffed a paw over the ground, tail flicking softly. Worry was obvious in his expression--in the corner of her eye, Willowpaw saw Thorntail turn his head away, hurt glistening in his young gaze.

"I should check on Goldenpool--she might need me to watch the kits." Oakcloud's eyes were dark in thought.

"Oh, come on!" Blossompaw sighed. "I've been stuck in camp the last three days doing nothing!"

"Goldenpool needs me right now," Oakcloud told her firmly, "and *you* need to learn some patience."

"Patience isn't the problem," Blossompaw growled, "I've barely gotten to train at *all,* and I've been an apprentice for two moons! Those two have trained more than I have, and they've only been here for *half* a moon!" Her tail lashed in the direction of Lark and Pine, who had begun to stir because of Blossompaw's loud voice. Snowfern turned a hard gaze on her daughter.

"Rock, Lark, and Pine are trained because we *know* they want to protect their Clan. You just want to protect yourself, you selfish kit!" Snowfern hissed.

Willowpaw winced at the words, suddenly grateful that she hadn't confronted Snowfern on not paying attention to her--better to be ignored than scolded.

Blossompaw's fur began to rise, her eyes filled with rejection. She opened her jaws to snap at her mother, but Mossrain's voice sounded. "Enough! You're disturbing my patients. Either take it outside or knock it off--next cat to raise their voice will find enough poppy seeds to knock out a badger in their next meal."

Even Blossompaw quieted, her tail twitching softly. Her ear flicked, and if Willowpaw didn't know better, she would've thought Blossompaw was listening to a cat speak--but everyone was silent at the moment. "I'm sorry, Mossrain."

Willowpaw thought she had misheard her sister and stared blankly. Mossrain was silent for a moment, staring at her with a deep, thoughtful expression. Then he finally looked back at Brightflower. "Good, you should be."

Blossompaw looked down, but Willowpaw thought she saw a brief flash of resentment in her eyes, mixed with the awkwardness that reminded Willowpaw of a scolded kit--a look Blossompaw had never shown before. "I'll wait outside," the reckless apprentice sighed. "We can leave after you spend time with Goldenpool."

Willowpaw couldn't help a surge of sympathy for her sister, and she decided give her sister the chance she needed. "I can check in on Goldenpool for you."

Oakcloud looked hesitant, while Mossrain meowed, "as long as you don't play with the kits or put too much pressure on your paw, you should be fine."

Willowpaw looked at Oakcloud for confirmation. The tom was quiet at first, looking uncertain. It was obvious he wanted to be with his mate, but he cast a glance at Blossompaw, who was looking back and forth between Willowpaw and Oakcloud with obvious excitement, the brightest look Willowpaw had seen on her for a long time.

"Okay," the senior warrior finally decided, turning his brown eyes back on Willowpaw. "Just make sure she has everything she needs. If... if something seems wrong, come get me, okay?" There was something in his eyes, something that suggested he saw a dark outlook on his mate's future.

A tingle of anxiety ran down Willowpaw's spine, but she forced her gaze to be strong, watching as Oakcloud and Blossompaw left the den. She got to her paws carefully, briefly stretching out her muscles despite them painfully protesting.

"Hold on a moment, Willowpaw," Mossrain meowed. He was softly packing cobwebs into Brightflower's belly fur, then left his sister after giving her cheek a lick and headed to his herb storage. Curious, Willowpaw limped a few steps toward him. "I have some

herbs I want Goldenpool to take--she's not allowed to say no, so make sure she takes them."

"Yeah, yeah, I can do that." Willowpaw tilted her head, peering at Mossrain's paws as he took a few herbs from his storage, sniffing at them and picking out certain ones.

"Hmmm..." Mossrain seemed to be thinking, tugging out a pile of rounded yellow flowers. "I might have you bring some of this to Dappletail, too. It would be good for both of them to have it."

"What is it?" Willowpaw took another step over, taking an interested sniff.

Mossrain sent her an amused look. "You remind me of Ravenpaw, you know." A soft fondness sparked in his eyes, memories swirling warm and strong. He looked back at the yellow flowers, not giving a chance for response. "This is tansy--good for coughs, or to stop them before they come. They're both weak right now, and sickness threatens the vulnerable. But it's still pretty fresh so it should work well, though if it doesn't, I have other herbs. There has to be other herbs... I'll figure it out, I'm sure! It's just best to catch it early, you know? Longer it's left untreated, worse it gets and weaker the cat gets, right?"

A worm of worry tugged its way through Willowpaw, and her mind briefly fluttered to Rowanpaw--because of the fight with the stoats, she hadn't been able to go see him. Would he be okay all alone out there? If he got sick, who would care for him? Anxiety tugged at her paws. "Is that the best herb for whitecough?" she asked, trying to keep her tone even.

"No, catmint is far better, but I only have so much, so I need to save it. It doesn't grow all that commonly, we only have a small patch near the tunnel in the forest, the one we take to the Gathering? Luckily, it's quite sheltered there, so I might even be able to pick some of the leaves if needed, not that I think we'll have an outbreak or anything, I just want to be safe, you know? Anyways, uh... what were we talking about before?" Mossrain's eyes clouded over in confusion, and he stared at the herbs in front of him.

"Herbs for Goldenpool and Dappletail?" Willowpaw suggested softly.

"Right!" Mossrain's whiskers twitched brightly. "Burnet and coltsfoot should be good enough to add as well, though I wish I had honey, it would be great for her throat!" He gave a soft sigh. "I wish I knew what herbs to use to help her..." He looked downcast for a moment, then sat up straight. "Well, better keep trying! I'll figure it out eventually."

He piled the three herbs into a bundle inside a large leaf, then made another of just tansy. "The small one goes to Dappletail, the bigger one to Goldenpool. Come back if there's any trouble or anybody needs something."

"Okay, Mossrain." Willowpaw picked up the bundles and limped the den, holding her injured paw off the ground to the best of her ability. The clearing outside was washed white with a cold sun shining down, small flakes of snow fluttering from the sky to cool her pelt. For a moment she took in the wild, fresh air, letting it fill her chest. The waterfall seemed louder with a coat of snow over the ground, and she decided to skirt the mist because she was already cold enough.

But as always, the nursery felt warm and comforting, curling around her coat and reminding of her peaceful, play-filled days. Maskdapple was asleep, as Blossompaw had claimed, curled up in her nest with her nose under her tail. Her stomach seemed to be getting bigger every day, and Willowpaw wondered how many kits the old queen would have--and how many would end up surviving. Willowpaw knew leaf-bare was dangerous for kits, but at least by the time they were born there would only be a moon left of the cold season.

Dappletail was awake with Dustkit and Maple curled at her side, her elderly eyes watching them fondly. She briefly looked up when Willowpaw entered and gave a simple nod of greeting before looking back at the kits.

Heatherkit and Stormkit were with Goldenpool, and Willowpaw's heart thudded with sympathy as she watched them. The queen was thin, and extremely so--she wasn't just leaf-bare thin, either. Her

body was practically skeletal, with each rib visible, legs thin as sticks, and cheeks shallow with eyes dull and tired. She had been refusing meals recently, claiming she didn't feel hungry, and it was obviously affecting her harshly.

Yet she stared strongly at her young daughters curled against her sunken flank. "Just wait for greenleaf," the exhausted queen was saying in a dry, hoarse voice. "The air is so warm, and the forest--oh, it's the most beautiful thing to be seen. The leaves are so bright and green, and the sun shining through the trees, it's indescribably wonderful. It makes you feel, just... free. So, unbelievably free."

The kits shivered and asked excited questions, and Willowpaw couldn't help but picture the sight as Goldenpool described; she had never seen a greenleaf forest--she only got a brief look at leaf-fall before the snow came. By the time greenleaf came, Willowpaw would likely be a warrior--she couldn't stop the shiver of excitement and anxiety swirling together inside her chest.

"I'll be the greatest apprentice ever!" Stormkit decided happily. "I'll learn every fighting move, and I'll come back to camp and show you what I've learned!" she added to her mother.

Goldenpool blinked softly. "That sounds wonderful, dear." She ran her tail along the young kit's back.

Willowpaw watched Goldenpool for a few moments. Despite the fact that she was thinner than ever, she seemed better than the previous few days. Maybe she could convince the queen to eat. Willowpaw approached the nest softly, and Goldenpool looked over, sniffing the air.

"Tansy? And is that coltsfoot, too? Oh, Mossrain, I'm breathing fine, there's no need for that."

Willowpaw was impressed that the she-cat could distinguish the scents--the herbs were hidden in the wrap, just mingled smells that clotted the apprentice's throat. She set the bundles down outside the nest. "Mossrain thought they would help," she explained, setting the bigger bundle inside the nest.

Goldenpool leaned over, nosing the leaf open to look at the herbs there. "Burnet?" the she-cat murmured.

Stormkit leaned close to the herbs, sniffing them curiously. "What does burnet do?" she asked, tilting her head, golden eyes glowing like the setting sun.

"It helps give you strength," Goldenpool rasped in response. "I feel fine, though. No extra strength needed." She gave a soft purr, nosing the bundle back toward Willowpaw. "I don't need the coltsfoot or tansy, either. Give them back to Mossrain, will you, Snowfern?"

It took Willowpaw a moment to realize what Goldenpool had said. "Snowfern?" she asked in confusion.

Goldenpool stared at her for a moment, confused, then she blinked, and a soft realization touched her gaze. "Sorry, Willowpaw, guess you look too much like your mother."

Uncertainty made Willowpaw hesitate, but she gave a heavy swallow and tried to push the moment away. "Are you sure you won't take them? I could bring you something to eat, help you wash them down."

"Oh, I'm not hungry," Goldenpool said faintly, eyes falling on the herbs again. "Tansy--good for coughs--but I haven't been coughing."

"Mossrain wants to make sure you don't get whitecough," Willowpaw explained softly.

Goldenpool was quiet for a few moments, staring at the herbs. "Burnet? Does he think I'm weak?"

"Goldenpool?" Willowpaw asked softly. "Are you okay?"

Goldenpool looked over at her, looking confused for a moment, then her eyes cleared. "I... Yes, I'm okay. I'm sorry, I was just confused for a moment." She looked at the herbs again. "I taught him well," she added softly. "Such precautions--tansy, to stop me from getting whitecough; coltsfoot, to make sure I breathe properly; burnet, to help me keep my strength. He's a good medicine cat, even so young. I couldn't be prouder, you know."

"Then you should do what he wants you to, right?" Willowpaw suggested, nodding her head to the herbs.

Goldenpool stared, looking uncertain.

Stormkit touched her mother's shoulder with her nose. "How about we eat it together?" she suggested brightly. Without waiting, she leaned forward and took one of the tansy leaves, chewing it thoroughly with a disgusted look, but her eyes glowed with determination. She swallowed with a curled muzzle, then looked expectantly at her mother.

Goldenpool's eyes were warm and flooded with love. She leaned down and touched noses with the young kit. "I love you, my dear," she murmured, then licked up not only the tansy but the other herbs as well, swallowing them with a small wince. She looked at Willowpaw. "If you're willing, I'll take some moss soaked in water."

Willowpaw hesitated, then set her mind firm. "Only if you eat."

Goldenpool stared for a moment, then tilted her head. "What?"

"You need to eat before you drink," she said, remembering something Snowfern had once told her. "Drinking on an empty stomach will make you feel sick."

Goldenpool was quiet for a moment, then gave a huff, the beginning of a laugh. "You remind me of Ravenpaw," the she-cat said softly. "You could've been a pretty good medicine cat."

Willowpaw felt honored by the words--she had always respected the medicine cats, and she couldn't be prouder of her brother for following that path. He had changed so much already, becoming more confident with himself. *Please come back soon,* she prayed. Her heart ached for the days she had been able to see her littermates every day.

"Willowpaw? I said you could get me something to eat," Goldenpool cut through her thoughts. "Just, don't expect me to eat it all. Really, I'm not hungry."

"Don't worry!" Stormkit piped up. "We'll help you eat it--right,

Heatherkit?"

"Yeah!" Heatherkit quivered excitedly. "Get a vole! Or a mouse! Or a squirrel! Nothing with feathers!"

Willowpaw purred softly. "I'll do my best."

She gave Dappletail her herb bundle as well, and the elder seemed as enthusiastic as Goldenpool had been. Heading back for the entrance, a soft worm of worry slipped through Willowpaw's chest for Goldenpool. She seemed better in some ways, but worse in others. Hopefully Mossrain would discover a cure soon.

Willowpaw sat near Goldenpool's nest, watching the queen as she cleaned Dustkit's fur. The apprentice had caught a hunting patrol returning from camp and brought the queen and her kits two mice. Goldenpool had but a bite before washing it down with water Willowpaw brought in a moss ball.

Maple still slept against Dappletail's side, while Dustkit, Heatherkit, and Stormkit curled against their mother, bellies full and purrs in their chests.

"Sweet darlings," Goldenpool purred in between licks of her son's dusty brown fur. "They'll grow so strong, I know it."

Willowpaw gave a soft nod. "I'm sure they will."

"But I won't be here to see it."

Willowpaw started, staring at the she-cat in surprise. She opened her mouth, then quickly shut it again. Instead, she looked to Dappletail, hoping the elder had overheard. Her old eyes were locked on Goldenpool, eyes filled with grief and ears drooping. She met Willowpaw's gaze and blinked slowly.

"Don't fret, Willowpaw," Goldenpool added in a murmur. "Everything will work according StarClan's plan. Head on back to Mossrain's den, everything okay here."

Willowpaw hesitated, but Goldenpool watched her firmly. Finally,

the apprentice backed away and hurried from the den, her paws itching with anxiety. Her leg burned with pain, but she did her best to ignore it as she went back to the medicine cat's den, slipping inside with a limp.

Mossrain was at his storage, picking through his herbs with every bit of his concentration. He was even muttering to himself, swiping a few leaves on his pad and bringing them to his face, taking a deep breath. With a sigh, he shook them away into a pile of ripped and dead herbs.

"Hey, Willowpaw," Brightflower greeted softly. She was lying on her side with Petaldust squeezed into the nest behind her, head rested on her neck. He was breathing softly, deep in sleep--he looked very peaceful.

"How is the nursery?" Mossrain didn't look up from his herbs, tail flicking in concentration.

Willowpaw padded over, trying to keep light on her injured leg. "It was, uh," she hesitated with her words. She came up beside Mossrain, lowering her voice to a soft murmur. "Goldenpool seemed... off."

The young medicine cat looked over, worry sharpening his gaze. "Off?" he repeated.

"She said something really strange," Willowpaw breathed. "That she wouldn't see her kits grow up. When she said it, she looked... really peaceful."

The light died in Mossrain's eyes, but he held gaze with the apprentice. He was quiet for a while, then he finally dropped his head and murmured, "thank you, Willowpaw." He reached into his storage with a lost look and dragged out a leaf with a pile of small black seeds. He clawed two free and swept them in front of Willowpaw. "Take these and rest. I'll wake you tonight so you can eat."

Willowpaw didn't complain and obediently licked up the seeds. She started for her nest, then paused. "She... she said something else,

too. When she sent me back here, she called it *your* den. I know it's not uncommon, but how she said it..."

Mossrain was silent for a long time. "Sleep well, Willowpaw," he meowed finally. Then he crossed the den and disappeared into the clearing.

"Is everything okay?" Brightflower asked, eyes sharp with worry.

"I... I hope so," Willowpaw answered back faintly. Then she went to her nest, curled up, and hid her face under her tail. Over and over again, she saw Goldenpool's face, the quiet serenity in her eyes. When blackness fuzzed over her mind, she was still thinking of the sick queen.

Chapter Sixteen

You just want to protect yourself, you selfish kit!

Blossompaw let in a shivering gasp of icy forest air, letting the frozen wind push her mother's words from her head and carry them away. But her heart was still clenched by frozen claws.

Oakcloud approached her side on silent paws. "We'll be hunting," he decided.

Frustration rose in Blossompaw's stomach. "We *always* hunt! Can't we have battle practice just *once?*"

"I've told you before," Oakcloud meowed, "we'll practice fighting once you can do as you're told."

"Maybe I'd do what you say if you listened to what I want!" she growled, letting her anger warm her body and melt the claws around her heart.

He scoffed with amusement, a glow returning to his eyes as he allowed his worry for Goldenpool to fade. "And why would I do that? *I* am training *you*, Blossompaw. Perhaps once you start realizing that, things will get easier for the both of us."

Blossompaw's fur bristled to its full extent, and she braced her legs firmly in the snow, her muscles tightening. "I want to fight," she demanded. For over half a moon, Brookstar had been training her in the Black Forest where the dead she-cat lived, teaching her skills every night. She was desperate to show them to Oakcloud--the moment he saw her fight, he would believe her skills were instinctive, and he would change to completely focus on battle training. In no time, she would become the best in the Clan.

But first, she needed the chance to actually show him.

Oakcloud stared at her for a long time, and she waited with a

twitching tail. "One day, your stubbornness will make you a great warrior," he commented.

His words froze Blossompaw, her eyes going wide and her shoulder muscles relaxing slightly. *Is he... complimenting me? But...* nobody *compliments me. Only Brookstar has ever done that...* She stared, completely captivated.

Oakcloud stared down at her, his face as regal and unreadable as ever. "But," he continued, his voice still smooth and almost entrancing in the way he spoke, "you must learn when to use it, and when to step down. That will take time, so for now, I will accept a compromise."

"A... compromise?" Slowly, Blossompaw began to again recognize what he was saying. She forced herself out of the tunnel slowly engulfing her, giving her coat a shake of determination. "Yes!" she said firmly.

"Never agree before you know what you're agreeing to," he meowed. "We will fight, but *after* hunting. Find and catch a squirrel, then we'll see what you can do."

Excitement flared in Blossompaw's stomach, and a soft voice drifted through her mind, comforting and calm like a warm breeze. *You did well. Oakcloud has great strength, and his intelligence is unmatched. If he put his skills to better use, he could be one of the greatest warriors the Clans had ever seen. But he has one fatal flaw--he is no leader. He will share his thoughts, his ideas, and he will lead when he has to, but he is not one to stand above others. His place is on the side. Learn from him and grow to become better.*

I will, Brookstar! Blossompaw promised, relishing in her friend's words. "Deal!" she answered Oakcloud firmly. "I'll show you how good I am!"

Without hesitation, she rushed off, racing through the forest with snow billowing up into clouds behind her. She didn't even hear Oakcloud on her tail until he was in front of her, forcing her to a stop. She froze, legs tingling, her breath coming fast in the cold air, icy in her throat.

"What? There's no prey near camp, so we need to go farther, right?"

"Correct," he confirmed, his breath coming out in a cloud around his muzzle. "*But,* you have to be silent while on your way, or you'll scare any prey in the area. And you *must* conserve your strength in leaf-bare."

"But that wastes time," Blossompaw argued. "The faster we go, the more prey we catch."

Oakcloud's whiskers twitched. "I don't like wasting time either, but you also need to think everything through. What if a fox had come into the territory? You're going so fast you could run right into it. Or, even worse, you go right by it and don't notice. It follows you and attacks you from behind. Or it follows your trail back to camp. You have to think of every possibility. You must use every sense available to you at all times--rushing in will get you killed, whether hunting or fighting."

"But in battle, you need to strike first," Blossompaw argued.

Oakcloud softly flicked his tail. "In battle, you need to do what is *smart*. Sometimes, yes, striking first is the better option, it gets you ahead. But what if you rush your opponent and they are faster than you? Any possibility of gaining the upper paw will be lost, and you could be taken down in an instant. And in that charge, if you got too far from your Clanmates, no one will be able to come to your rescue."

Blossompaw turned away from Oakcloud, her ears twitching. She slunk off in search of prey, asking silently, *is he right, Brookstar?*

A few moments of silence passed, then Brookstar answered, *as I said before, take his advice.*

Do you know what I can do to impress him? Blossompaw asked.

She was given nothing but the soft whisper of the wind, and an unsettling feeling instantly began to boil in her stomach. She tried to focus, using all her senses to search through the smell-suffocating snow, but her mind continuously flickered back to her unanswered

question.

Brookstar? she asked as she twisted her way through the snow-frozen undergrowth. *Are you there?* She tried to give her friend enough time to answer, making a conscious effort to keep her tail still, since all it seemed to want to do is flick around anxiously. She could feel Oakcloud's eyes on her fur and it made her skin crawl. She shoved her nose under a bush, letting the snow shower her. The strong flash of cold calmed her for a moment, but it quickly flared again. Her claws impatiently scratched the snow, flexing in and out.

She forced herself to continue on, winding her way through the snowy undergrowth, searching for any sound. And, finally, a soft flutter of wings. She followed it, making sure to keep each step completely silent, despite the impatience quickly settling under her skin. *Are you watching, Brookstar? Are you okay?*

No answer.

She let out a slow breath, sneaking a look through a dried fern to see a blackbird chewing on some frosted berries, wings fluttering as it jumped back and forth, completely distracted. It would've been an easy catch if there hadn't been a small stretch of clear ground between Blossompaw and the bird. She would have to take a long way around, and she would probably end up being seen, judging by the bird's constant movement.

And besides, she didn't want a blackbird, she wanted a squirrel; she wanted to have battle practice. She took a small step forward, felt her paw touch the snow, and pressed just a little too hard too fast. It crackled softly under her. The bird raised its head, looking alarmed. Out of pure instinct, Blossompaw froze, not even daring to blink. *Fly away,* she thought.

But then it turned back to the berries, and Blossompaw had to hold her tongue, struggling to hide her frustration. She knew Oakcloud was watching like a hawk. She took a few careful steps around the open space, keeping to the shadows. She slipped carefully under some undergrowth, but let her tail briefly flick up, a wild movement any cat could make in an anxiety-inducing moment like this.

The twigs of the dead plant rattled and without hesitation the bird was fluttering through the air. She hoped beyond anything that her hiss of frustration covered the start of her relieved sigh. "Bad luck," Oakcloud commented tonelessly. She glanced back at him. He stood completely still, fur coated with white powder and eyes entirely unreadable. "After all, every cat makes mistakes sometimes."

His tone made her skin crawl, but she forced herself to stay strong--Brookstar had taught her more than battle skills, she had taught the apprentice to hold herself strong; if she believes she's in the right, others will, too. And so, she hid her fear and uncertainty behind a mask of disappointment of her lost catch, but a tinge of hope. "I'll do better and catch the next one," she promised.

His ear twitched. "Then you'd better get on. We have much to do today."

I agree, she wanted to say, but there a look in his eyes that distracted her. It had been brief, too brief to understand. But it at least showed her there was something under his guarded exterior. She realized with a small shock that he was doing the same thing Brookstar had taught her--hiding thoughts and insecurities with a mask.

Without a word she turned and continued on, tail twitching. She *needed* to show her strength to Oakcloud. *Brookstar, are you back?* she asked, continuing to tread deeper into EchoClan territory. Her friend was still eerily silent, and Blossompaw tried to stop sending her thoughts to her friend, knowing she had plenty to do, trying to gain StarClan's favor back. Blossompaw didn't want to annoy her.

But her loneliness continued to grow as she prowled the silent forest. Oakcloud was an ever-present shadow behind her, his eyes watching her every movement. She took a glance upward, spying through the bare branches above; it was past sunhigh, the air still and cold despite the bright glow. They had been out here for longer than she thought--she had been so distracted in her hunt, she only now began to realize the slow hunger beginning to twist her stomach and icy chill in her numbed pads.

And then, finally, she heard it. The small scuttling of paws. She

froze, heart beating rapidly, then crouched and slowly made her way around a tree, poking her head around as slowly as she could.

There!

A squirrel, thin but still large in size, was scratching around the roots of a tree, trying to dig through the snow. She could've cursed herself for her ignorance--Boulderclaw *and* Oakcloud had told her this was a favorite spot of squirrels because in the warm seasons, the tree, a large black oak, dropped constant acorns.

She wanted to catch the squirrel as quick as possible, but she reminded herself she couldn't risk missing it--it would take much too long to find another. Her stomach growled to remind her that she hadn't eaten since that morning when Dappletail shared her morning prey--Blossompaw didn't know why the elder had done it, perhaps an ulterior motive, but in the moment the apprentice hadn't cared.

Blossompaw forced her mind clear, scanning the area for the best approach point. She decided the bush directly in front of her hiding tree would work well--even without leaves, the twisted branches would cover her pelt with broken shadows and allow her to blend well into the snow. She slunk forward, taking each step with precision, pausing when the squirrel stopped digging and waiting the heart-racing moments in silence until it started again.

She slipped behind the bush, her breath silent around her muzzle, and circled around until she was almost close enough to bat the squirrel's tail--at the moment, its head was so far into the snow she was pretty sure she could tap it on the shoulder before it realized she was there. She just had to be completely silent as she bunched up her muscles, readying herself for a small but strong leap that would hopefully snap the squirrel's spine so she wouldn't have to draw blood. Her head tucked close to her shoulders, she tested her muscles with a small movement of her shoulders, then dug her claws in as she readied for her leap and--

A branch snapped under a heavy paw.

Blossompaw jumped in surprise at the sharp noise behind her and

reacted too late to catch the squirrel--by the time she tried to leap for it, it was already swarming up the black oak's trunk.

She whipped around to face Oakcloud, who was raising one paw away from the broken sliver of wood in the snow before him. "Oops," he said simply. "Sorry. It's okay, though, right? After all, every cat makes mistakes sometimes." There was a cold glint to his eyes.

Blossompaw's fur bristled. "You did that on *purpose*?"

He mocked surprise. "Excuse me? I would *never* sabotage a hunt. It was a mere accident--just like with the blackbird."

Blossompaw was steaming with fury, the biting cold whisked away faster than a rabbit racing the wind. "You're lying! You wanted me to fail the hunt!"

His eyes turned cold, but his voice was calm and controlled. "You should choose your next words carefully--accusing a senior warrior of lying isn't the best option for a young apprentice."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be lying!" she shot back, ignoring the ants that seemed to be crawling over his fur.

Oakcloud just blinked. "I gave you a simple test and you failed--you scared the blackbird away to find a squirrel sooner, that means you cared more about your own gain than the health of your Clanmates."

"I wanted to have plenty of time to practice fighting!" she insisted. *My own gain over them...* She had to keep her thoughts straight and her legs strong because she felt ready to curl up in the snow and let everything fade away. Once again, her mother's words came back--*you just want to protect yourself!* Did the entire Clan really think she just wanted to advance her skill for herself? She wanted to become the best warrior to protect them!

Then she noticed Oakcloud's eyes. Underneath that guarded gaze, she swore that for a brief moment, he looked quite sad. "I told you, it was a test, and you failed. If you had tried to catch the blackbird,

whether you got it or not, we would've gone straight to battle practice, because you would've shown you cared more for your Clanmates. But you choose to further your own gain. So now, we'll go back to camp, and if you argue, you won't see a single battle session until the snow melts."

"I just--"

"Hush." His meow was calm but firm. "Not a word. You did well with Mossrain, you admitted your wrongs and I was proud, so do it now for me. We are going home, you are going to stay in camp and out of trouble. You will be allowed to eat tonight despite not catching anything, but tomorrow we'll be hunting from sunrise to sundown and you won't argue once. You need to learn to listen, and after that everything will go smoother and quicker. Now come. I want to be with my family."

And when he turned and stalked away, Blossompaw followed in silence.

Every step felt heavy, like she was dragging herself through deep water. His words repeated over and over. She thought back to Maskdapple, her first mentor. No matter what the old warrior said, it never really reached Blossompaw, not in a lasting way. But Oakcloud spoke in such a coldly calm manner it slipped right in and settled deep in her heart. He thought she was selfish, that she worked for herself.

Is that true? she asked. *Is it all really for myself? Aren't I trying to help my Clan?* She dully watched each pawstep, Oakcloud's tail barely visible, flicking in and out of her view. She never realized how small her paws were. How soft the white fur made them look. She briefly faltered but forced herself on. She didn't want Oakcloud to scold her again.

Brookstar, please answer me. Brookstar was helping her, she knew it. Oakcloud had praised her for one thing--how she treated Mossrain, apologizing instead of fighting like she wanted to. The only reason she had done that is because Brookstar told her too--she didn't understand her friend's softness for medicine cats, but she was hopeful to ask tonight, if her friend visited.

Come back, Brookstar, please. I need you.

VERY Important Announcement

So, for a long time, I've been struggling with Clouded Skies, which is probably obvious seeing on how slow my uploads are. I love this story so much, and I have so much of it planned. From the start, I've known Ravenpaw and Rowanpaw's stories from beginning to end. Maybe some things have changed, some storylines were fleshed out, but their primary stories have always had the same arc, the same plotline. I love all that it has come to be, and I want to continue writing it for as long as possible, continuing to different points in the story I'm so excited and anxious for I wish I could write them now.

But, no matter how much I love this story, I am constantly aware of its flaws. Rowanpaw's story went fast, Ravenpaw's story has so many plotlines left behind it's not even funny, and Blossompaw's important storyline has been so sidelined it barely appears. I remember most things from the story pretty clearly, but it's hard to remember I've been writing this story for years and for you, the readers, it's probably harder to remember what has happened.

And I know that right now, I don't have many readers, and I don't know if any of you will respond to this, but I have a question I would really, really like an answer to:

Should I start over?

I'm so conflicted with the thought I can't even stand it. I love the idea of it, of fixing the story and making it so much better, but it would take so long, I would have to wait even longer to get to the future. But plotholes would be fixed, storylines would be stretched and fixed appropriately, characters would get deeper stories even from the start, and we would eventually get back to this point.

But it would take. so. long. I started writing the first book of the story in 2018. It's been four years (wow, just wow), and I really, really don't want the new time around to take that long, because it would be so incredibly exhausting.

Or, I can continue from where I'm at now. I could figure out closing plotholes smoothly throughout the story, and though I will admit that though I have most of the storyline planned out (Ravenpaw's entire life, actually...), I do have a time gap coming up soon that I have no idea how to fill. With restarting the story, I could fix that gap.

But I don't know. It's so much work either way, and so much time either way.

So that question: Should I start over?

Yeah, I'm going give some time for you guys to decide. I know there's only a few of you, but any feedback would be so greatly appreciated, even if it's just a "yes start over" or a "no keep the story". Though, honestly, even if most people chose one option (honestly I don't expect anything over like three answers, and it's fine if you're not interested in responding), I might go with the other, it really just depends on the feedback and how my feelings develop over the next few days. I'm already setting it up as if I was restarting the story just to see how I feel about it, and I do like it more, but wow, the time I know it would take, it puts the far-off future so much farther.

Okay, I'm just repeating myself now, so I'll stop with this last addition: Underneath is a list of all the side books I have planned for this series, mostly super editions with two novellas. I just figured I'd put them all here to see if any of you have feedback of which ones you like the idea of the best and least, or if there's any that you wouldn't care much about either way. So yeah, again, thanks for any possible feedback you give. The writing for all these books are really slow mostly because I just use them when I want to write Warriors but can't think of what to put in the main series, and they usually help my inspiration.

SE: Super Edition (longer than a regular book, around 40 chapters)

N: Novella (shorter than a regular book, around 10 chapters)

Brookstar's Promise (SE) - Before Brookstar became known as EchoClan's dangerous, tyrannical leader, Brookstar had been an innocent kit, just like any other. Perhaps, there was once hope for her, but the same path that can make the best hero can also make for the worst villain.

Acornstar's Misery (SE): Acornstar has led EchoClan for many moons as their harsh, unpredictable leader. But before her mind was torn, before her sanity was taken, Acornpaw was a simple apprentice wanting to do anything to protect her Clan and family.

Leafstorm's Agony (SE): NightClan reigns as a terror over the forest, a shadow in the minds of all who live near their borders. Inside their harsh, cruel territory, young Leafkit is born into a terrifying life, and must fight every day to prove she is worthy to be one of their great warriors.

Robinstike's Fate (SE): For as long as she remembers, Robinstrike has been fighting--fighting for her life, or fighting for the lives of her suffering Clanmates. But even as time goes on, even as she is torn down again and again, Robinstrike will always stand strong for those who need it, even when her world crumbles around her.

Boulderclaw's Secret (SE): After his father's death, Boulderpaw is desperate to become strong enough to defend his Clan and keep his family safe, but a shattering mental state begins to lead him down the wrong path.

Silverstrike's Loyalty (SE): Silverstrike has fought his entire life for what he believes in, and none of his Clanmates have ever questioned his loyalty. Only he knows when it faltered.

Hail's Sorrow (N): Even though Hail liked to adventure, he knew he was a kittypet at heart. But after a meeting with a wild loner named Bell, Hail had to question whether he really knew what living meant.

Newt's Shadow (N): After the death of his mother, young Newt is suddenly introduced to a father he had never met and a half-brother

desperate to get rid of him.

EDIT: I made the decision to restart the series. Next part will go into more detail if you're interested.

The Restart

Despite how long it will take, I've decided to restart the series. Before I made my ultimate decision, I decided to do a practice rewrite of the Prologue, and I loved it so much, it makes the series and what's going on feel so much more important. I also planned out the plotlines of each chapter of the first book and though it's very similar, it drops things I now consider less important and goes more into the things I wish I had before. Here's a quick rundown of things I decided to change:

- The Abandoned Twolegplace was changed to a still active one

- The territories were updated (not by much)

- Ravenpaw will no longer have an ability (I honestly never fully liked it in the first place, which is why it was rarely mentioned, and if I had continued the original story, I would have had it taken away/given up)

- Blossompaw will have a much more active part

- The first book's chapters (I'm planning on there being 24) will loop from Ravenpaw, Rowanpaw, and Blossompaw's perspectives

- Chapters will be longer (they are usually around 3000-5000 words, I'm going to try to keep them over 5000)

- Ravenpaw will no longer visit the past (I want to write a prequel series, but him visiting the past makes prequel series useless, and takes from Ravenpaw's storyline time)

I also wanted to talk about one of the main reasons I decided to restart. Not only do I like the new ideas of how the story can go more, I can smooth out the timeline, as it got a little jumbled. Originally, I had planned the first series to have the cats growing up and learning to be adults, ending with them all having their warrior/medicine cat names, then the second series would be a

little more growing up and the conflict against MothClan. But with how slow the story was going, with Ravenpaw and his littermates being barely nine moons old at the end of the fourth book, the timeline just wasn't working, I had too much to get done. So I was going to have to push MothClan back to the third arc just to have time for the cats to grow up, but I had no idea what I would do to fill those six books in the second arc.

I know I didn't really need to explain that, but I wanted to get it out there. Anyway, since the Prologue is written, I'm going to post it as a preview to the first rewritten book (which I renamed 'Oncoming Storm') along with the first chapter on June 1st. Then, I'll start officially uploading the story on July 15th. I'm going to plan for an update once every two weeks, but if I manage to do well on writing it faster, I might be able to manage once a week, but I'm going to try my best not to push myself with it.

Anyway, thank you to anyone who is reading now and in the future, I hope you enjoyed this version of the story and I hope you enjoy the new one even more.

(Also, I will keep up the old books for the foreseeable future.)